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cineACTION



WAR FILMS

The Hurt Locker
In the Valley of Elah
The Thin Red Line

FEMALE DIRECTORS

Nancy Meyers
Vera Chytilova
Japanese Directors

\$8 CDN / US



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WAR

2 Explosive Structure

FRAGMENTING THE NEW MODERNIST
 WAR NARRATIVE IN *THE HURT LOCKER*

by Douglas A. Cunningham

11 Imperial Symptoms

IN THE VALLEY OF ELAH AND THE CINEMATIC
 RESPONSE TO THE "WAR ON TERROR"

by Gregory A. Burris

20 Refiguring Rambo

COMPETING IMPERATIVES IN THE
 HIGH CONCEPT WAR FILM

by Harrison Gish

28 Critical Voices

POINTS OF VIEW IN AND ON
THE THIN RED LINE

by Jeremy Millington

39 Representing the Human Condition
in the Great War

WILLIAM BOYD'S *THE NEW CONFESSIONS*
 AND *THE TRENCH*

by Jane Mattisson

FEMALE DIRECTORS

46 Formal Innovation and Feminist Freedom

VERA CHYTILOVA'S *DAISIES*

by Alison Frank

50 Female Sexuality, Islam and the Global

LEILA MERRAKSHI'S CONTROVERSIAL FILM *MAROK*

by Touria Khannous

56 Original Visions

FEMALE DIRECTORS IN CONTEMPORARY
 JAPANESE CINEMA

by Adam Bingham

62 Seeds of Summer

by Maria San Filippo

65 Enough Already

THE WONDERFUL, HORRIBLE RECEPTION
 OF NANCY MEYERS

by Darryl Wiggers



2



28



46



62



WAR FILMS and FEMALE DIRECTORS

The intent of this issue of CineAction is to open up to fresh investigation two areas of interest that have long histories in film theory and criticism: the War Film, and Female Directors and their Films.

War films present an intriguing contradiction in that this popular and historically omnipresent film genre seems to have sunk to the bottom of audience appeal—witness the recent box office disasters of even critically acclaimed films on US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan—while at the same time, the success of war at the level of the fictional and cartoonish superhero, has never been more prevalent nor fiscally rewarding.

And we're not even talking about video games which involve warfare on an equally simplistic and adolescent level.

As for female directors, at last year's Toronto International Film Festival (2009), a publicist commented that there had never been so many female directors' works included, to which a critic retorted that nevertheless, they still made up a fraction of all the directors whose films were being screened.

These two themes would appear to be quite opposite in practically all ways. Typically the War film has been aimed at male audiences, while female directors have been posited as producing films that deal with women's concerns and interests. One TIFF (North American) premiere was Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*, a film which went on to win the 2009 Academy Award for best picture against the juggernaut that was James Cameron's GCI-enhanced *Avatar*. Needless to say, Bigelow was the first female to win an Academy award for best director, and the film she won with was a War film set in Iraq.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE 83

ROBIN WOOD

Our friend and colleague Robin Wood died December 18, 2009. CineAction will be dedicating an issue to Robin and we are inviting readers to submit articles:

1) Dealing with Wood's contribution to film criticism; 2) on films and/or directors that he wrote about; 3) offering a close reading of the film. Robin's genuine love and commitment to the cinema infuses his writing. We intend this issue to be a celebration of Robin's identity and inestimable contribution to film criticism.

Deadline for submission is October 31, 2010.

Edited by Florence Jacobowitz fjacob@yorku.ca and Richard Lippe rlippe@yorku.ca

Please email any questions or interest to the editors. Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editors at 40 Alexander Street, #705, Toronto Ontario, Canada M4Y 1B5.

A style guide is available on our website www.cineaction.ca

Explosive Structure

FRAGMENTING THE NEW MODERNIST WAR NARRATIVE IN *THE HURT LOCKER*

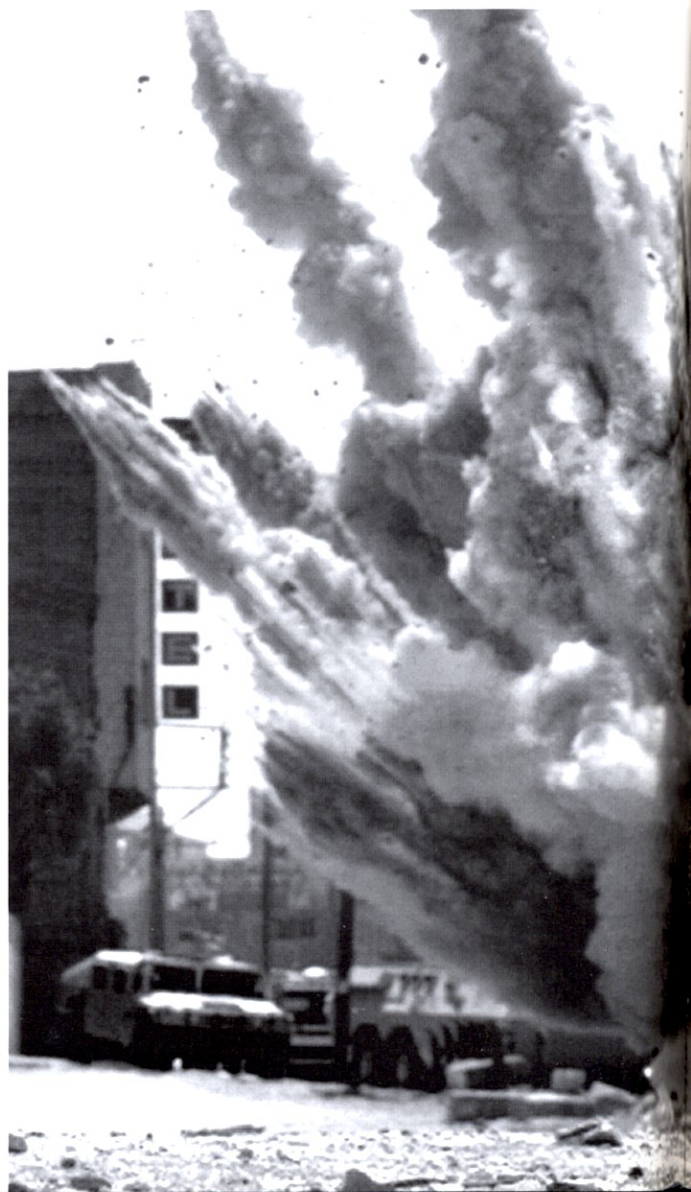
by DOUGLAS A. CUNNINGHAM

Fragmentation

emerges as a formal theme in art

most particularly during times of conflict—a reflection, one assumes, of the ways in which body, mind, and individual/collective consciousness rupture in response to the violence of war.¹ Kathryn Bigelow's 2009 film, *The Hurt Locker* (written by journalist-turned-screenwriter Mark Boal), stands as a remarkable example of this notion; its successful integration of form with a larger theme of physical, mental, and social fragmentation results, at least in part, from the very structure of the film itself, which refuses at every turn to adopt a traditional narrative arc. The story of a U.S. Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team in Iraq and its dangerously reckless new leader—an adrenaline-addicted staff sergeant named Will James (Jeremy Renner)—*The Hurt Locker* builds its narrative around seven key episodes—a prologue, the activities of five disparate days during Bravo Company's tour, and what might be considered a two-part epilogue that follows James after his end-of-tour trip back to the U.S. and his eventual (and voluntary) return to the war zone. Throughout the film, we see superimposed titles that announce 38 days remaining in Bravo Company's tour, then 37, 23, 16, and 2. Ostensibly, the film employs the loose structure of its central countdown as a way of marching its three protagonists toward their collective return stateside; this chronicling of time itself, however, seems far less important to the film than the fact that each of the five days depicted deliberately offers little in the way of active narrative causality. Bombs are discovered and deactivated. Soldiers survive a desert standoff with snipers. A desperate and renegade search for a lost Iraqi boy turns out to have been unnecessary. A nighttime pursuit of Iraqi bombers ends in their capture and an associated friendly fire injury. James returns to the States but then goes back to the war zone of his own volition. These are the primary episodes of the film.

In the June 2009 review of the film for the *New York Times*, A.O. Scott praised *The Hurt Locker's* episodic structure: "Ms. Bigelow, practicing a kind of hyperbolic realism, distills the psychological essence and moral complications of modern warfare into a series of brilliant, agonizing set pieces."² While each of these set pieces contributes to a kind of minimalist causality that fuels the emotional disintegrations of the film's primary characters, the five central episodes of *The Hurt Locker* nevertheless eschew the demanding forward thrust of a classic action narrative oriented around events and resultant effects. In truth, the film seems to derive its structure and style in part from the modernist tradition so apparent in the international art-house films of the '50s and '60s. At the same time, however, *The Hurt Locker* also seems to resemble something of a cinematic collection of serialized war-correspondent dispatches, each of which resolves the most pressing problem at hand while also offering up small details of character development that contribute to a larger—if subtler—vision of psycho-emotional collapse. These two very different influences (which are nevertheless linked by their common ties to modernist aesthetics) come together most effectively in *The Hurt Locker's* primary generic antecedent (both in terms of form and theme), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979); like that film, *The Hurt Locker* moves forward in carefully calculated fits and starts, the deliberately uneven push of its narrative's individual episodes not even superficially marking progress toward a tangible climax, while the true development in the film takes the powerful form of a commentary on the necessarily shattered nature of individual wartime experience.³



From its first moments, *The Hurt Locker* violently shakes its spectator's worldview. After a solemn epigraph by Chris Hedges declaring that "war is a drug," Bigelow cuts harshly to a battered video-cam's "first-person" view as the small, treaded vehicle to which it is attached rumbles over rocks, rubble, and trash on its way to a suspicious, tarp-covered bundle that may, we imagine, conceal an improvised explosive device, or IED. Even as she cuts away to shaky and terse shots of Coalition forces establishing a perimeter amidst loudspeaker orders (in Arabic) for citizens to clear the streets, Bigelow's cinematography (Barry Ackroyd), editing (Bob Mirawski and Chris Innis), and sound editing (Paul N.J. Ottoson) already reflect a feeling of overwhelming and scattered sensory overload—as if the very nature of this place (Baghdad in 2004) thwarts all attempts to keep pace with the potential threats that seem to lurk behind every angle from which the camera affords a view. Eyes watch from everywhere, their invisible lines of sight fragmenting even empty air into a disjointed, distorted grid of myriad loyalties and intentions. The most wary among these eyes—those belonging to two American soldiers, Staff Sergeant Matt Thompson (Guy Pearce) and Sergeant J.T. Sanborn (Anthony Mackie), members of Bravo Company's EOD team—are introduced to us through extreme close-up shots of their eyes. (Even the bodies of our protagonists are initially splintered by the camera into component parts, a strategy that denies spatial and

situational orientation to the spectator while, at the same time, underscoring the extent to which the act of visual vigilance is central to survival in this battle zone.) The Americans regard a television console that receives the video signal from the robot examining the bundle some 300 meters away, but Thompson, the easy-going professional, will soon find himself dangerously close to the bundle, performing a task the robot could not complete on its own. In a remarkable sequence composed of 18 different shots filmed at varying speeds—both slow and natural—from some 15 separate angles, Thompson will perish as the bomb is detonated remotely. Within minutes, Bigelow has already succeeded in fragmenting spectatorial experience through her formal presentation of an unstable and unsettling opening sequence that prefigures *The Hurt Locker's* overall disruption—even explosion—of mainstream narrative drive.

Bigelow's film, in fact, abounds with formal nods to the fragmentary experience of war. Even aside from the analogies one can draw between the fragmentation of bombs and the fragmented natures of war and its ever-weary participants, Bigelow frontloads every moment of *The Hurt Locker* with formal techniques that inevitably feed her larger theme. Her camera, for example, is in constant, jittery movement, as are her lenses, which endlessly focus and refocus on new objects or view the

The Hurt Locker





The Hurt Locker

same objects from new angles. Her cutting is fast and impatient, rarely holding a single shot for more than a few seconds. The speed of her cutting, however, belies the inordinate length of her sequences, which consistently outlast the typical duration seen in standard Hollywood products. Her transitions between sequences are jarring, often shocking the viewer through leaps in space, time, sound, and tone (e.g., the abrupt cut from the end of the solemn desert sequence to the heavy-metal chaos of the “buddy-punching” sequence that solidifies the homosocial bond among James, Sanborn, and Eldridge). Bigelow’s construction of space is also fragmentary, disorienting; she varies her camera angles and proximities from extreme close-ups to extreme long shots, all of which are juxtaposed against one another multiple times within the same sequence (a technique most remarkably on display during the bomb deactivation at the United Nations complex). Each of these formal techniques helps Bigelow to build and reinforce her theme of the fragmentary nature of warfare and its effects on the individual psyche.

None of these aesthetic tools, however, does as much work in solidifying the motif of fragmentation in *The Hurt Locker* as the explosive structure of the narrative itself. With its insistence that the film move forward on emotional rather than causal terms, the narrative sits squarely within the modernist camp. Peter Childs, Peter Conrad, and Randall Stevenson agree, in fact, that narratives such as that shown in *The Hurt Locker* have roots in a modernist impulse that emerged in response to World War I, and, more broadly, as Sara Haslam asserts, in the works of Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Ford Madox Ford, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf.⁴ The innovative narrative trends initiated by these writers cleared a path for similar trends in cinema, appropriated first—and almost immediately—by the cinematic *avant-garde*, but later embraced by international feature filmmakers whose works heavily influenced Bigelow’s own style and philosophy.

If the formal aspects of *The Hurt Locker* fuel its larger theme of fragmentation, both physical and psychological, then the narrative itself draws on the influence of art-house cinema to achieve these same thematic ends. Such an influence should come as no surprise given that Bigelow began her artistic career in 1971 as a painter studying at the San Francisco Art Institute and, shortly thereafter, as a scholarship student at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City, where she studied with—among others—Susan Sontag.⁵ After steeping in the New York *avant-garde* scene for several years, Bigelow attended graduate school at Columbia, where she studied film production and theory with the likes of seminal film theorist Peter Wollen.⁶ “This intellectual background and training in ‘high’ art,” argue Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond, “informs much of the critical reception that has met Bigelow, despite her penchant for the seemingly superficial allure of glossy action, and accounts for the ease with which she alludes to cultural theory in interview.”⁷

Such a background may also account for the depth and nuance of her film work. Soon after graduating from Columbia, for example, Bigelow wrote and directed (with Monty Montgomery) her first feature, *The Loveless* (1982), a film about a biker gang’s ultimately violent sojourn in a Florida backwater circa the mid-1950s. Jermyn and Redmond note that this film “is marked by its leisurely pacing, fragmented exposition, performances and dialogue, all of which underline its low-budget, art-house origins,” and, indeed, more than any other film in Bigelow’s *oeuvre*, the structure and style of *The Loveless* stand as probably the closest early indicators of the fractured narrative we see nearly 25 years later in *The Hurt Locker*.⁸ Each scene in *The Loveless* reveals a great deal about character (we learn much of Willem Dafoe’s Vance, in particular, merely by watching him watch others—he’s an acute student of human behavior clad in a studded leather jacket and riding boots). These same scenes play out for their own sake, however, rather than

for the sake of pushing a plot forward: Vance awaits the rest of his gang at the local diner; upon their arrival, the bikers hang out at the diner and ogle the waitresses; the bikers move to a local garage to repair a broken motorcycle; Vance joyrides with, and then beds, a local teen, Telena (Marin Kanter), only to watch afterward as her father drags her away with a shotgun in tow; eventually, Telena guns down her father in full view of the bikers at the town's favorite watering hole; the bikers move on to Daytona. Rather than narrative causality, Bigelow and Montgomery dwell on visual details, atmosphere, and quirks of character and circumstance.⁹ "I hadn't embraced narrative at that point," Bigelow claimed of her work on *The Loveless* during a 1995 interview with Gavin Smith:

I was still completely conceptual, and narrative was antithetical to anything in the art world. That was the big juncture. When you're thinking of plastic or visual arts you're using the non-narrative part of your brain. So the thinking behind *The Loveless* was to suspend the narrative and create this visual tapestry with enough narrative to give you the illusion of a story percolating, kind of there but not there, held by gossamer threads.¹⁰

Bigelow's metaphor for her first feature's tenuous claim on narrative proves an apt way of describing how both *The Loveless* and *The Hurt Locker* proceed; unconcerned with the demands of traditional plot, structure, and causality, the "story" of each film does prove to be wispy and fragile, like gossamer, but somehow fascinating and compelling at the same time.

One might entertain the idea that Bigelow's aesthetic of narrative fragmentation has derived, at least in part, from her theoretical tutelage under Sontag. In 1967, after all, Sontag published an essay in *Sight and Sound* entitled, "Bergman's *Persona*," in which she established some of her central ideas about what she called the "new narrative":

Instead of a full-blown story, [Bergman] presents something that is, in one sense, cruder and, in another, more abstract: a body of material, a subject. The function of the subject or material may be as much its opacity, its multiplicity, as the ease with which it reveals itself to being incarnated in a determinate action or plot. In a work constituted along these principles, the action would appear intermittent, porous, shot through intimations of absence, of what could not be univocally said. This doesn't mean that the narration has forfeited "sense." But it does mean that sense isn't necessarily tied to a determinate plot.¹¹

Granted, Sontag writes here of films much more oblique in terms of linear narrative and/or plot than what Bigelow/Boal offer us in *The Hurt Locker* (e.g., Antonioni's *L'avventura* [1960], Renais' *Last Year at Marienbad* [1962], and *Persona* [1966]); she goes on to argue, in fact, that many of these "new narratives" are characterized by a "competing retrograde principle, which could take the form, say, of continual backward and cross-references"—a technique not employed in Bigelow's 2009 film.¹² Still, as Sontag points out, the tenets of her "new narrative" argument hold true for more accessible (if still intellectually challenging) films such as Rossellini's Neorealist masterpiece,

Journey to Italy (1954), which, she claims, has "a tendency to de-dramatize."¹³ Significantly, Sontag does not assert that *Journey to Italy* lacks drama; instead, she notes that Rossellini's film "proceeds by omissions," which is to say that its driving force takes place not at the levels of action, movement, or even dialogue, but rather at the levels of tone, character, and, particularly, emotion.

In his seminal 1983 book, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell also writes of art-house cinema's "tendency to de-dramatize," and, like Sontag (and, more specifically, Marcel Martin), he notes the influence of postwar Italian Neorealism on the art-house product that followed in the '50s, '60s, and '70s:

The contemporary cinema [Marcel Martin] claimed, follows Neorealism in seeking to depict the vagaries of real life, to "de[-]dramatize" the narrative by showing both climaxes and trivial moments and to use new techniques...not as fixed conventions but as flexible means of expression....Specific sorts of realism motivate a loosening of cause and effect, an episodic construction of the *syuzhet*, and an enhancement of the film's symbolic dimension through an emphasis on the fluctuations of character psychology.¹⁴

Such an understanding of the hyper-alternative approaches to narrative seen in the art-house films of Antonioni, Bergman, Godard, and Resnais helps to explain much of the similarly fragmented structure of *The Hurt Locker*, which, although ostensibly grounded in the genre conventions of the war film, nevertheless shares with its art-house predecessors a commitment to tone, character psychology, and larger thematic questionings—all of which develop through the atypical use of standard formal elements, what Bordwell terms "flexible means of expression" (e.g., shot duration; montage; camera angle, proximity, and movement; diegetic and non-diegetic sound, etc.). As Bordwell further notes, "We have seen that the classical film focuses the spectator's expectations upon the ongoing causal chain by shaping the *syuzhet's* duration around explicit deadlines....By removing or minimizing deadlines, not only does the art film create unfocused gaps and less stringent hypotheses about upcoming actions; it also facilitates an open-ended approach to causality in general."¹⁵

Perhaps *The Hurt Locker's* most stunning example of these assertions occurs during the film's protracted sequence in the Iraqi desert. The sequence occurs at a particularly tense emotional moment in the film. By this time, James has already defused several bombs as the new leader of Bravo Company's EOD team, but his methods have proven to be headstrong and prideful rather than safe and calculated, and he has often endangered Sanborn and Eldridge. As two men who simply want to do their job and return home, Sanborn and Eldridge even contemplate "fragging" James in the scene that immediately precedes the desert sequence, although James himself seems blissfully unaware of their intentions. Soon after, however, James, Sanborn, and Eldridge find themselves in a standoff against several heavily armed militants across a blurry distance of about one half mile. Over a period of 10 minutes in screen time (and what seems to be about 3-5 hours in diegetic time), both sides attempt to scope and eliminate enemy targets using high-powered sniper rifles. Sanborn mans the Coalition's rifle while James, using a monocular scope, directs aim; Eldridge

covers the rear. Bigelow takes her time; through its seeming interminability alone, her bold set piece already defies conventional narrative practice; indeed, the very essence of the sequence rests on the merits of patience, or, more specifically, on the ability of the EOD team (and, indeed, the audience) to withstand the passage of time once Bigelow has, per Bordwell, “removed the deadlines”. We wait for what seems an eternity between Sanborn’s directed rifle shots: James asks Eldridge to retrieve ammunition and encourages him as he cleans blood from the bullets in a magazine; Sanborn takes aim and fires several well-spaced shots on the enemy holdout; James offers a juice drink to Sanborn; Eldridge spies and kills an insurgent approaching from the rear; James and Sanborn wait in the desert weeds to ensure that they have, indeed, killed the last of the enemy snipers. Finally, Bigelow cuts to an establishing shot of the setting sun to indicate the passage of hours before James wearily declares they are safe to leave. The sequence has the effect of aligning the audience’s experience of time and duration with that of the characters in a way that is not unlike the kind of challenge we experience in, say, the ’70s work of Chantal Ackerman (most obviously in *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), but, perhaps, most similarly in *Les rendez-vous d’Anna* (1978)).¹⁶ Unlike in Ackerman, however, the sense of protracted time we feel in *The Hurt Locker*’s desert sequence comes not from any unusual duration in Bigelow’s shots (indeed, from the time Sanborn assumes his position at the sniper rifle to James’ announcement that his team is, in fact, “done”. Bigelow cuts some 197 times, and no shot lasts longer than 15 seconds); rather, the sense of tense tedium arises from the length of the sequence itself. Although ostensibly an action set piece, then, Bigelow not only “removes the deadlines”, but she also employs another essential convention of Sontag’s “new narrative” films: the development of narrative at the level of character and emotion rather than at the level of causal action. After all, taken at face value, the sequence offers no causal contribution to a larger plot of the film; the sequence does, however, perform the very important emotional work of foregrounding the formation of a bond among the principal characters, all of whom realize implicitly they must work effectively as a team to overcome their current threat. While similar examples may be found throughout the film, the desert sequence stands as the premier example of the ways in which *The Hurt Locker*’s fragmented narrative style derives from the modernist aesthetics pioneered in feature films by the likes of Rossellini, Bergman, Antonioni, and others.

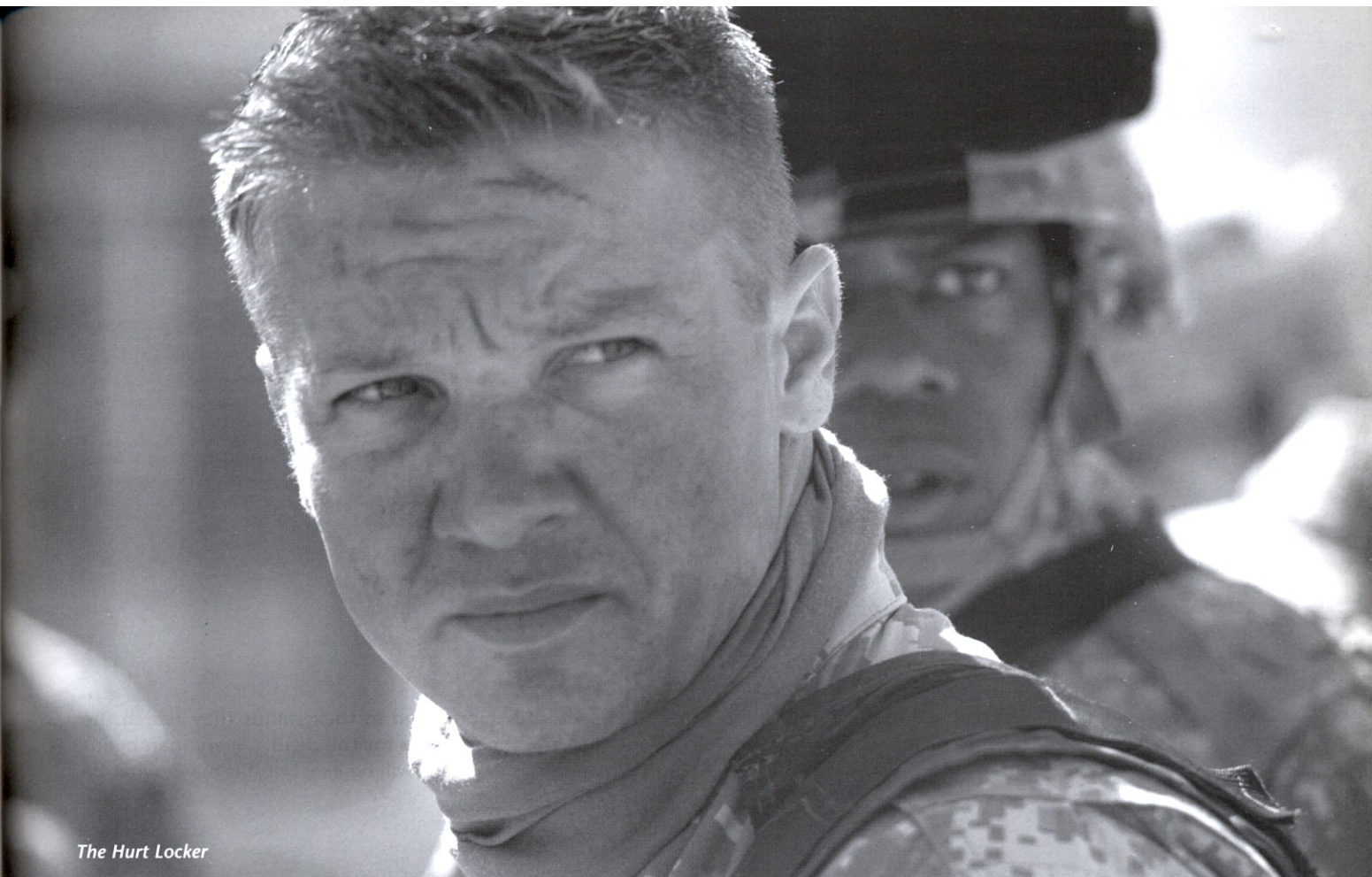
While *The Hurt Locker* owes much to such art-house predecessors, however, it seems equally indebted to the style, structure, and sensory details of war-reportage collections such as John Steinbeck’s *Once There Was a War* (1958) and Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977)—influences that mesh well with screenwriter Boal’s background as a journalist and embedded reporter in Iraq.¹⁷ In many ways, such works are part and parcel of the same modernist trends that helped to form Sontag’s “new-narrative” art films: fragmentation, which is to say, an emotional immediacy created from a compounding of isolated, episodic experiences; a reliance on minimalist prose to carry the burden of the work’s power and meaning; and an intimate attention to character and contingency over story arc and causal logic, to name just a few examples. Perhaps the most compelling of such modernist effects is an unwavering faith in the power of the part to effectively capture the essence of the

whole; indeed, the common denominator among such war-reportage collections is their effective extraction of a psycho-emotional crux that ultimately serves as the connecting thread through an otherwise disparate array of wartime experiences.¹⁸ “Instead of verifiable snapshots from the campaign,” Mark Bowden writes of Steinbeck’s World War II reports from the European theater, “in each of these stories [Steinbeck] reaches for some universal experience of war. Many [stories] in [Steinbeck’s] collection have been massaged and stretched by a gifted storyteller....But if you want to know how it *felt*...there is no better source.”¹⁹ Bowden’s bold assertion is borne out in nearly every passage from this compilation of Steinbeck’s 1943 dispatches for the *New York Herald Tribune*; each boasts a particular attention to sensory detail, to the ignored spaces between events (recall Sontag’s claim that *Journey to Italy* “proceeds by omissions”), as shown in an excerpt from a piece entitled “Invasion,” which chronicles the shaky nerves of World War II American infantrymen en route via troopship from North Africa to action in Salerno, Italy:

In the moonlight on the iron deck they look at each other strangely. Men they have known well and soldiered with are strange and every man is cut off from every other one, and in their minds they search the faces of their friends for the dead....Every man builds in his mind what it will be like, but it is never what he thought it would be. When he designs the assault in his mind he is alone and cut off from everyone. He is alone in the moonlight and the crowded men about him are strangers in this time. It will not be like this. The fire and the movement and the exertion will make him a part of these strangers sitting about him, but he does not know that now. This is a bad time, never to be repeated....The men sitting on the deck disappear into the blackness and the silence, and one man begins to whistle softly just to be sure he is there.²⁰

Steinbeck’s achievement here—his inimitable rendering of a tense, isolated moment of waiting, of moving helplessly toward a very uncertain and all-too-threatening future—relies almost exclusively on his powerful flare for imagery and his uncanny talent for articulating what all the troops feel but hesitate to verbalize. *Once There Was a War* brims with such moments, which are reported chronologically but presented as complete episodes unto themselves. Any plea for causality between the stories misses the point; they are linked and therefore united by their essence, or what Ty Hawkins might call their “Truth”.²¹ Although Herr’s book, *Dispatches*, differs vastly from Steinbeck’s in terms of voice and style, Herr follows a similar narrative strategy; that is to say, like Steinbeck, he sees his war—Vietnam—as a collection of vignettes that form a larger, more integral thread through the sum of what may at first seem like nothing more than random, disparate, and fragmented parts.

Herr, of course, stands as a unique bridge between the wartime work of Steinbeck and the more recent collected writings of war correspondents such as Dexter Filkins (author of *The Forever War*, published in 2008, which covers events in pre-invasion Afghanistan and post-invasion Iraq) because of Herr’s contribution as a co-screenwriter for *Apocalypse Now* (and, later, Stanley Kubrick’s 1987 film, *Full Metal Jacket*). Certainly



The Hurt Locker

Herr must have seemed an obvious choice for work on both films based upon the success of his collected Vietnam war-reportage memoirs, *Dispatches*. Through its spot-on deployment of junglewise G.I. gutter-talk and hard-biting, between-the-lines irony, *Dispatches* strings together myriad stories, snippets, and vignettes—all equal parts horror, solemnity, and black comedy—to form a collage of the Vietnam War that rings with an uncanny sense of phenomenological accuracy. His chapter titled “Illumination Rounds,” for example, offers up a pastiche of some 19 of these vignettes—none of which connects in any narrative or linear way to the others—and each varying in length from several pages to only a few sentences. “A twenty-four-year-old Special Forces captain told me the story,” Herr writes in the shortest and most economical of these pieces, and he continues by quoting the captain’s tale: “I went out and killed one VC and liberated a prisoner. Next day the major called me in and told me that I’d killed fourteen VC and liberated six prisoners. You want to see the medal?”²² No further elaboration proves necessary. We understand the initial event, its manipulation, and the resultant ironies. We understand, too, that the Special Forces captain and Herr share a sardonic view of the entire episode, a view that speaks to what they see as the larger illogic of the Vietnam War itself. Set apart on its own amidst the longer vignettes from Herr’s chapter, the snippet could very easily stand in for the whole of *Dispatches* itself, as could any other of the myriad vignettes from the book. Herr sharpens each piece to its most acerbic point and then posi-

tions it strategically in relation to all the others. Herr’s aim, Hawkins writes, is to lay bare the essence of experience in wartime Vietnam:

...the many voices and images and sounds one encounters in *Dispatches*—all the sensory detail that leaps from Herr’s pages until it threatens to and often does overwhelm readers—are but so many data streams shoveled aside. Herr excavates past these details until he uncovers the war’s Truth, its signified. This Truth is at once the destructive horror and reconciliatory allure, ironically enough, of violent death.²³

Like Steinbeck, Herr demonstrates an ability to encapsulate, and thereby universalize, otherwise unfathomable experiences, and the success of his efforts (again, like those of his predecessors) rests on an understanding that the “Truth” of the war in Vietnam cannot be communicated through an all-encompassing, linear causality. (Filkins’ *The Forever War*, in fact, follows in much this same vein.) Such works declare that war is—and always has been—a fractured phenomenon in itself.

No wonder, then, that Herr’s script for the voice-over of *Apocalypse Now* supports the fragmented nature of that film’s episodic structure through a use of clipped, cynical, and economical narration designed to comment on mental and emotional disintegration.²⁴ Drawn liberally from the pages of modernist writer Joseph Conrad’s 1902 novel, *Heart of Darkness*, the film tells the story of a U.S. Army assassin in the Vietnam War,



Captain Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen), who travels with a Navy PT boat crew up the Nung River through Vietnam into Cambodia, all the while moving closer to his quarry, the renegade Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando). The Conrad source material and Kurtz's references to T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" do much to signal the film's roots in modernism, but the narrative structure itself performs the greatest part of this work.²⁵ Willard's journey—which consists of several seemingly unrelated sojourns at various outposts of black humor, terror, and tragedy along the river—serves more as a meditation on the myriad horrors of war, colonialism, and insanity than as a series of momentum-driven events bent on delivering Willard to his final geographic destination.

Herr's narration, which hails directly from his style in *Dispatches*, works wonders in connecting the dots of Willard's emotional disintegration throughout the whole of *Apocalypse Now*. Tightlipped and reticent like a Hemingway protagonist, Sheen's Willard delivers Herr's lines like a worked-over *noir* anti-hero, and they convey a unifying, universalizing power that Coppola's images alone—however powerful—do not achieve.²⁶ Mid-way through the film, for example, Willard witnesses the PT boat crew's trigger-happy slaughter of five Vietnamese civilians during a routine boarding and inspection of a sampan. A young woman on the sampan is severely wounded but still alive, and the boat's skipper, Chief, wants to transport her to a Vietnamese hospital. Willard sees no point. Much to the shock of the PT boat crew, Willard takes his sidearm and kills the woman himself. In voice-over, Willard later reflects on the incident: "It was a way we had over here of living with ourselves. We'd cut 'em in half with a machine gun and give 'em a band-

aid. It was a lie. And the more I saw of them, the more I hated lies. Those boys were never gonna look at me the same way again. And I felt like I knew one or two things about Kurtz that weren't in the dossier." As with many of the episodes in *Apocalypse Now*, this incident is never revisited in causal terms; its impact, however, clearly haunts the characters and the remainder of the film. Herr's powerful narration works to bridge gaps in our understanding of Willard's emotional response to the event and the role the incident plays in his larger ideological/intellectual alignment with Kurtz. By removing the obligation to tell a story based on an action-driven causality—where one event necessarily brings about another until the path back to the beginning looks clearly defined when viewed from the end—the modernist narrative of *Apocalypse Now* succeeds in revealing how unrelated events come together in a collage to form a larger picture of psycho-emotional transformation.

Although it employs no narration, *The Hurt Locker* closely resembles *Apocalypse Now*'s use of fragmented narrative in service of a larger emotional arc. James and his EOD team move from incident to incident, and no causal thread connects these other than James' dogged determination and his comrades' concomitant anxiety. As in *Apocalypse Now*, then, the emotional toll on the men becomes increasingly palpable with each new episode. Bigelow and Boal make no attempt to attribute the long series of bomb threats to a single agent or organization, nor are they interested in tracing the patterns of the bombmakers' activities across the many episodes that feature bomb deactivations. The film is no more about the bombmakers, in fact, than it is about the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, just



as, similarly, *Apocalypse Now* is not—at its core—about Army assassins or the war in Vietnam; rather, both films set their respective psychological odysseys against convenient and contemporaneous backdrops in order to ponder the ways in which war inevitably complicates the hope of returning home (if such a place still exists) as a “whole” person, body, mind, and soul. While both Coppola and Bigelow may owe large debts to literary and cinematic modernists, then, their recompenses must also make room for the likes of Homer and Virgil.

We first meet *The Hurt Locker*’s Will James in a state of withdrawal. Alone in his dark quarters and surrounded by heavy-metal music, his hands clenching and opening repeatedly in the psychosomatic sign language of an addict denied his fix, James seems one step away from meltdown. Like Willard in the opening sequence of *Apocalypse Now*, James is “waiting for a mission,” all the while feeling as if the walls are closing in on him. Like Willard, he is unable to reconcile the demands of romance and domesticity with his life’s work, but James handles this situation far differently from Willard. While *Apocalypse Now*’s would-be stoic protagonist wears his heart on his sleeve throughout the horrific journey up the river toward Kurtz (even sobbing openly at points throughout the film), James, conversely buries his troubles in the work itself; indeed, he needs the work to keep his own life from feeling fragmented like Willard’s. He feels whole only in the work. James seems all too aware from the outset that his insatiable lust for a life on the edge marks him as, perhaps, the greatest single danger to his comrades (“You’ll get it,” he quips of his adrenaline addiction to a frustrated Sanborn); still, he soldiers forward in his quest for the next thrill, smiling amiably at each new obstacle, extolling

the virtues of sunlight, and chuckling “Let’s rock ‘n roll!” on his way to defuse yet another bomb. By the end of *Apocalypse Now*, Willard’s emotional disintegration transforms itself into an intellectual and spiritual awakening; in *The Hurt Locker*, however, James’ eager return to an unidentified war zone demonstrates that nothing for him has changed, despite everything he has seen and done. He is trapped in a vicious cycle of addiction, the war that is “like a drug,” and he realizes he cannot—does not want to—break free.

The true emotional arc of the film’s fragmented narrative, then, must be followed through Sanborn rather than James. Sanborn, after all, is the only character in the film to change as a result of the myriad events seen in the film, while James merely reboots the entire experience. The change in Sanborn becomes most evident during the scene that immediately follows the film’s final bomb sequence (in which James fails to remove a heavily locked explosives vest from a pleading Iraqi man who is desperate to be freed from the device). Sanborn, who has helplessly witnessed the event and narrowly escaped death himself, leaves the scene with James in their Humvee. Reflecting on his close scrape, Sanborn tearfully admits to the unaffected James that he does, after all, want to have a son—a direct contradiction to a definitive statement Sanborn made to James and Eldridge earlier in the film. James seems tired, distracted, unsure of how to reassure his friend, but still positive and even happy in a spookily disaffected way. When Sanborn asks James how he gets through these war experiences, how he “takes the risks” knowing that he has an infant son at home, James, still unphased from the day’s (even the tour’s) experiences, struggles to find an answer. “I dunno. I guess I just don’t think about it....Do you know why I am the way I am?” Sanborn, both bewildered and—we might imagine—disgusted, can only reply, “No, I don’t,” at which point Bigelow, in a masterful match cut, moves us from the blur of angry Iraqi street boys seen through the Humvee’s window to the shockingly surreal blur of plentiful American grocery store products as if seen from a rolling shopping cart. James’ final days in Iraq and the journey “home” have been elided, and the shock of the now-defamiliarized capitalist marketplace stands in stark, surrealistic contrast to the drab poverty, ruins, and sand of Iraqi landscape and cityscape.

Through the sequence that follows, we come to understand just how different James is from Sanborn (and, indeed, almost anyone else); his idea of a fragmented life is depicted through Bigelow’s quick cuts of James sleepwalking through a variety of domestic experiences—shopping, selecting a brand of cereal from a colorful choice of dozens, cleaning out a rain gutter, staring into space amidst the snow of television static, washing vegetables, and playing with his infant son. James has it all: a home, an adorable child, and a beautiful wife. He already possesses everything that Sanborn has learned to desire so thoroughly throughout the painful tour in Iraq. In the end, however, James re-confirms what he has always known—he cannot fragment himself or his affections. “The older you get,” he tells his infant son, “the fewer things you really love. By the time you get to my age, maybe it’s only one or two things. With me, I think it’s one.” Hawkins’ critique of Herr’s *Dispatches* would seem to apply to *The Hurt Locker*, as well: “...He posits that for all of its horror, combat issues forth a degree of transcendence operative nowhere else in human experience. This transcendence entails the conjunction of creation and destruction,

action and submission, will and fate, chance and pre-destination."²⁷ As he returns to the war zone, James also returns to his state of his wholeness. The fragmented narrative of the film and its associated contributions to Bigelow's larger themes of fractured individual psyches in wartime have never, then, served as a formal of expression of James' personal subjectivity. On the contrary, we come to learn that James, rather than acting as our point of identification throughout the film, ultimately emerges as our point of contrast—the personification of wartime wholeness against which to compare the fragmented subjectivity of characters such as Sanborn and to which we've been exposed since the opening sequence. This realization accounts for the awe and (perhaps) dread we feel at the overlapping sound, and later the sight, of troop-carrier choppers once again landing in the combat zone. Bigelow's second match-cut from James' striding combat boots to his bomb suit boots, the tilt up to his satisfied smile behind his helmet's window, and the final on-screen titles announcing "Days Left in Delta Company's Rotation: 365," drive home the idea that while this fragmented narrative has acted as a formal reflection of war's necessarily splintering impact on the individual psyche, we should not assume for one moment that all psyches react to such events in the same way. Thus, while *The Hurt Locker* effectively captures the "Truth" of individual wartime experience through its modernist aesthetics, it also captures the "Truth" about the kind of personality that cannot feel whole apart from such an experience. The coexistence of these Truths stands as one of the film's most disturbing insights.

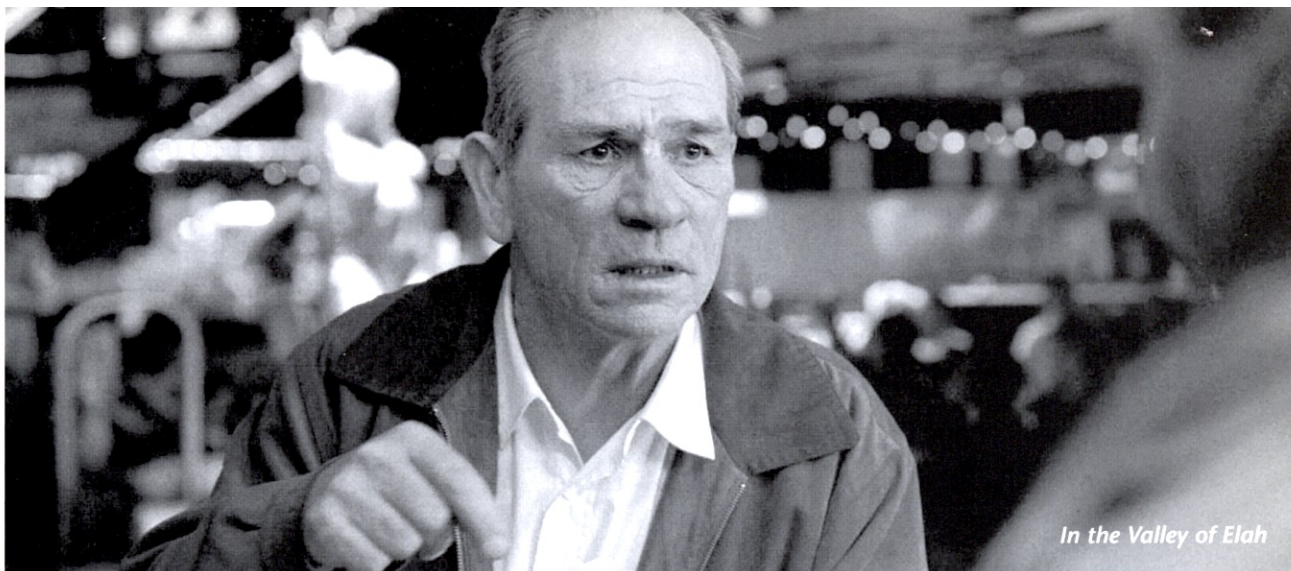
Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* uses formal techniques, particularly a fragmented narrative, as a way of commenting on the fragmented nature of warfare and its effects on the individual psyche. The use of the fragmented narrative as a way of conveying an arc of emotional detail and development is very much derived from the modernist traditions seen in the literature of the early twentieth century and manifested cinematically most notably in the art-house films of the '50s, '60s, and '70s. Just as the aesthetics of these art-house films influenced the structure and style of *The Hurt Locker*, so, too, did the episodic and self-contained natures of war-reportage dispatches such as Steinbeck's *Once There Was a War* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* also influence the film's successful deployment of the fragmented narrative. Herr's work as a co-screenwriter on *Apocalypse Now*, in fact, seems to have laid an important structural and emotional foundation upon which *The Hurt Locker* may have built in its development of a new modernist war narrative. Perhaps most important, however, is the fact that *The Hurt Locker's* epilogue underscores the important role played by the film's fragmented narrative, for only in seeing the film's protagonist set in opposition to that subjectivity do we fully comprehend the extent to which he, in his desires and in his personal definitions of wholeness, differs markedly from his companions. James and his addiction, in fact, inspire us to ask larger questions—not necessarily about American involvement in Iraq or Afghanistan, about which the film remains decidedly ambivalent—but rather about the nature of the modern(ist) human experience and the extent to which an American life in the 21st century both fears and craves the kind of sensory overload that only something like war can provide. In this respect, are we really, in fact, far removed from the explosive effects of a year like 1917? Does modernity have a few surprises yet in store for us? If so, per-

haps a return to modernist aesthetics such as those seen in *The Hurt Locker* may help us to survive the coming onslaught.

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Notes

- 1 Sara Haslam, *Fragmenting Modernism: Ford Madox Ford, the Novel, and the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 6. Haslam cites Peter Conrad as particularly convinced of this argument. See Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places: Life and Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 203.
- 2 A.O. Scott, "Soldiers on a Live Wire between Peril and Protocol," *New York Times*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2009/06/26/movies/26hurt.html> (accessed January 30, 2010).
- 3 Throughout this essay, my references to *Apocalypse Now* will be to the version released in 1979, which, for reasons of economy and focus, I consider superior to Coppola's expanded 2001 release, *Apocalypse Now Redux*.
- 4 Haslam, 3.
- 5 Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond, eds., *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 6.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid. 7.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 These characteristics predate the same style we would recognize only a few years later in the films of David Lynch. Yet another painter-turned-filmmaker, Lynch offers up twisted portraits of small-town life, characters, and nostalgia would, in fact, seem to owe much to *The Loveless*. I am thinking in particular, of *Blue Velvet* (1984), *Wild at Heart* (1990), and his short-lived but masterful television series, *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991).
- 10 Kathryn Bigelow, interviewed by Gavin Smith, "Momentum and Design": Interview with Kathryn Bigelow," in *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor*, 30.
- 11 Susan Sontag, "Bergman's Persona," *Ingmar Bergman's Persona*, ed. Lloyd Michaels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 70.
- 12 Ibid., 73.
- 13 Ibid., 72.
- 14 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 206.
- 15 Ibid. 207. An understanding of the *syuzhet* requires first a definition of the *fabula* (both terms hail from studies of narrative). Bordwell defines the *fabula* as "a pattern which perceivers of narratives create through assumptions and inferences. It is the developing result of picking up narrative cues, apply schemata, framing and testing hypotheses....The *syuzhet* (usually translated as 'plot') is the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula* in the film. It is a more abstract construct, the patterning of the film as a blow-by-blow recounting of the film could render it." See Bordwell, 49-50.
- 16 Of interest here, as well, is the coincident fact that Ackerman, like Bigelow, also spent much of the early 1970s in New York City's *avant-garde* scene.
- 17 Michael Norris Pentagram, "Embedded Journalist Gives Iraq War Story Its Realism," *DCMilitary.com*, http://www.dcmilitary.com/stories/072309/pentagram_28242.shtml (accessed 19 April 2010).
- 18 Ty Hawkins, "Violent Death as Essential Truth in *Dispatches*: Re-Reading Michael Herr's 'Secret History' of the Vietnam War," *War, Literature & the Arts* 21 (2009), 132.
- 19 Mark Bowden, Introduction to *Once There Was a War* (New York: Penguin, 2008), xiii-xiv. My emphasis.
- 20 John Steinbeck, *Once There Was a War*, (New York: Penguin, 2007), 127-128.
- 21 Hawkins, 132.
- 22 Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 161. The chapter, "Illumination Rounds," may be found from page 156 to 174. My thanks to Brandon Lingle for bringing to my attention the significance of this section of the book.
- 23 Hawkins, 132-133.
- 24 Important to note is the fact that the narration for *Apocalypse Now* was really a joint effort arising from several different contributors—Herr, John Milius, and Coppola himself, among others. See Peter Cowie, *The Apocalypse Now Book* (New York: De Capo Press, 2001). See also, Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper's documentary film, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (1998).
- 25 Haslam, 3.
- 26 For more on *Apocalypse Now's* noir roots, see John Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film: Inversions of American Mythology in *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*," *American Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (Autumn, 1982), 418-439.
- 27 Hawkins, 133.



Imperial Symptoms

IN THE VALLEY OF ELAH AND THE CINEMATIC RESPONSE TO THE "WAR ON TERROR"

by GREGORY A. BURRIS

"A mother sings a lullaby to a child; Sometime in the future the boy goes wild."
—Porcupine Tree, "Blackest Eyes"

Hollywood has not typically addressed US military actions abroad while they are still ongoing. Indeed, one might recall that the cinema's answer to the last prolonged, decade-defining conflict—the Vietnam War—came in the form of a deafening silence, one which lasted well into the Carter years. While the frustrations of that era undoubtedly left a mark on the silver screen with countercultural films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969), the Vietnam War itself was, with few exceptions, not addressed directly. By the time war-related films like *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) finally appeared, US incursions on Vietnam had already passed into history, the distance of time acting as a buffer safely separating the audience from their own culpability in perpetuating that atrocious conflict. In other words, the immediacy had been lost.

It is thus remarkable that the post-9/11 era has already produced a number of films that deal directly with various aspects of the so-called "war on terror." Homeland security, Middle Eastern terrorism, torture, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and even the September 11 attacks themselves have all been made the focus of several mass-marketed Hollywood products. What, if anything, does the appearance of these films tell us about US society and how it has changed since the sixties, that decade when the cinema remained steadfastly silent even as napalm rained down upon the Vietnamese countryside?

At first glance, one is tempted to interpret the emergence of the "war on terror" genre as an indication that the US populace is more favorably disposed to subjecting the government's foreign policy decisions to critical scrutiny than it had been in previous decades. Indeed, a comparison of the public's response to the wars in Vietnam and Iraq might also suggest such a conclusion. While we tend to romanticize the flower children's pacifist protests today, one should not forget that their calls for peace did not reach a fever pitch until untold thousands of Vietnamese had already been slaughtered. In contrast to that generation's stalled protests, the buildup to the Iraq War was accompanied instead by a significant degree of popular opposition. Indeed, public outcry against the invasion actually preceded the war itself. In his book *Hegemony or Survival*, Noam Chomsky makes this very point.

In 1962, public protest was nonexistent, despite the announcement that year that the Kennedy administration was sending the US Air Force to bomb South Vietnam, as well as initiating plans to drive millions of people into what amounted to concentration camps and launching chemical warfare programs to destroy food crops and ground cover. Protest did not reach any meaningful level until years later, after hundreds of thousands of US troops had been dispatched, densely populated areas had been demolished by saturation bombing, and the aggression had spread to the rest of Indochina. [...] In 2002, forty years later, in striking contrast, there was large-scale, committed, and principled popular protest before the [Iraq War] had been officially launched.¹

Leaving aside the fact that many (though not all) “war on terror” films have been met with jeers from critics and audiences alike, let us ponder the following question; does the appearance of films like *Lions for Lambs* (2007), *Stop-Loss* (2008), and *The Hurt Locker* (2009) suggest a certain amount of political maturity on the part of US society?

In contemplating the contemporary “war on terror” film, it would be pertinent to turn to Andrew Britton’s 1981 essay “Sideshow” in which he discussed the war genre and reflected on those films dealing specifically with the conflict in Vietnam. Britton argued that the Hollywood war genre appeared in three classical modalities: the pro-military film, the anti-war film, and the home front film. The first of these three categories includes those films which glorify the US armed forces without questioning their actions. In the context of Vietnam, Britton singled out 1968’s militaristic *The Green Berets*, a film bearing an ideologically bankrupt message of gung ho patriotism that was about as divorced from reality as the film’s final fraudulent image: the sun setting over Vietnam’s eastern horizon. Coming in the late sixties, *The Green Berets* represents one of the few mass-marketed Vietnam War films to emerge out of Hollywood during that decade, though its reactionary treatment of that conflict has since returned with the release of *We Were Soldiers* (2002).

Conversely, the second category, the anti-war film, presents an image of war that is both gruesome and cruel. These films typically focus on the immorality of war, the bloodshed and the violence. *Apocalypse Now* perhaps represents the post-Vietnam era’s iconic example. In concentrating solely on the inevitable horrors of combat these films, whether deliberately or not, often end up depoliticizing war, removing it from its broader sociopolitical context. As Britton observed,

[A]ny account of America’s involvement in Vietnam (or in Chile or Nicaragua) which is based on moral condemnation alone is doomed to irrelevance, because the ethical objections to that involvement can only be formulated in terms of a political analysis of its objective determinants and aims. To say merely that America shouldn’t have been there tends to foreclose the recognition that it could scarcely have chosen not to be.²

Instead, all that was left in these films was a vision of the Vietnam War as some sort of personal purgatory, and the structural

causes that gave birth to that war in the first place—namely capitalist imperialism—were left completely off the hook.

Finally, Britton designated as the home front film those which concentrate on domestic events. Often, these films operate to praise the bourgeois family values upheld by the wives waiting for their husbands’ eventual return. Other home front films involve the struggle of returning war veterans to readjust to “normal” society. A recent example of this plot line is represented in *Brothers* (2009). In such films, there is scarcely any recognition that the two spheres—the normality of home and the chaos abroad—are actually interrelated phenomena. They are, in fact, two sides of the same atrocious coin.

For Britton, none of these modalities was adequate for dealing with the Vietnam War. In Britton’s words, “Vietnam is objectively unnegotiable [sic] within any of them: types one and three would amount to a defense of American imperialism, and type two would be incapable of distinguishing between imperialist and revolutionary war, and thus of grasping Vietnam’s political specificity.”³ While pondering today’s cinema, we might ask ourselves, does this same structural flaw within the war genre not also pertain to the contemporary “war on terror” film?

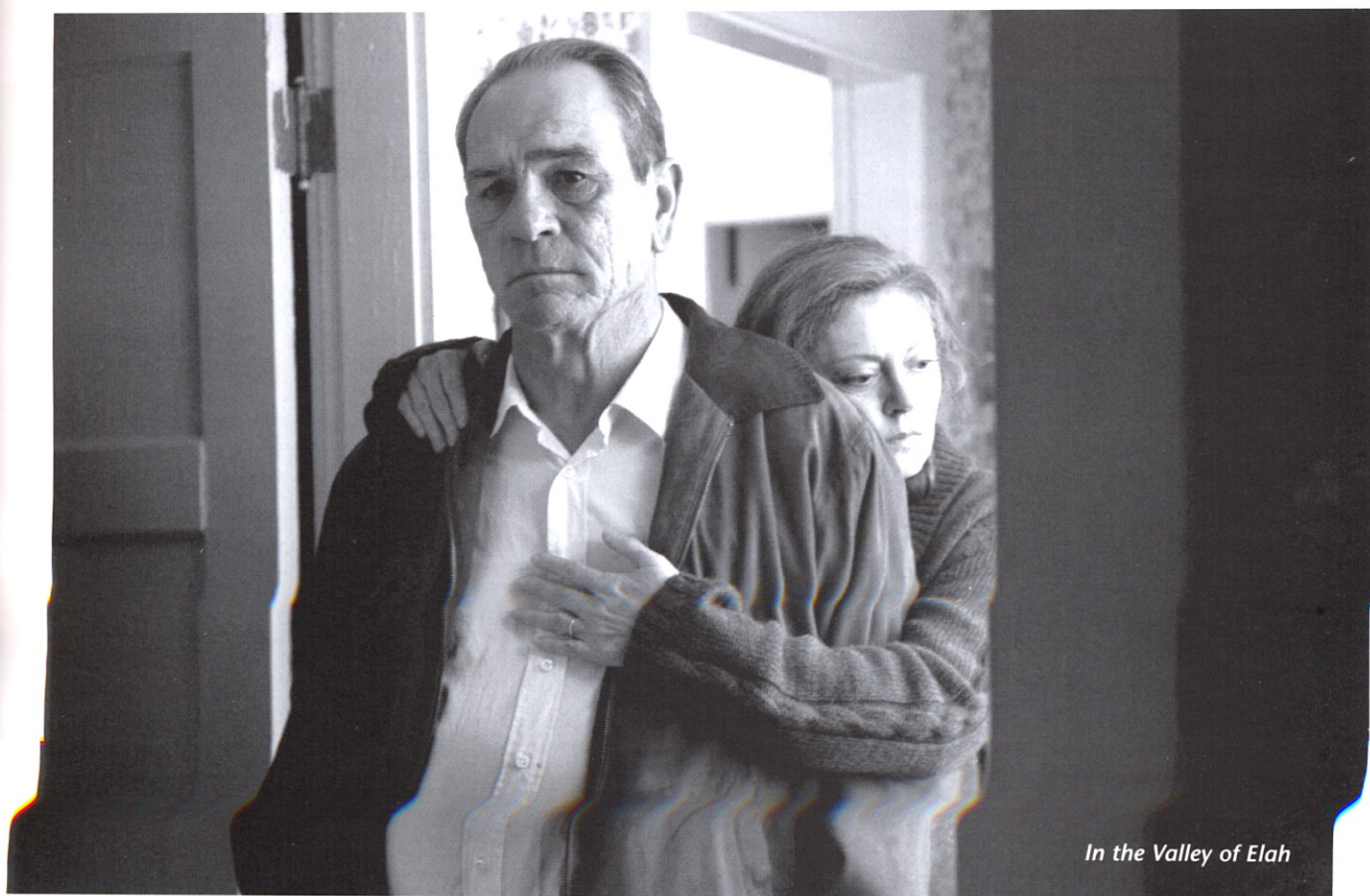
While very few “war on terror” films dare to valorize post-9/11 US military actions outright (*The Kingdom* [2007] is a possible exception), there is hardly any attempt to see war as anything more than a personal nightmare. In this respect, there is much overlap between the contemporary “war on terror” film and the second modality discussed by Britton. As we already know, war is hell. The problem with this overused mantra, however, is that it is a statement with which everyone can agree, equally acceptable to both dove and hawk, liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican, peacenik and Patton. Of course war is hell. But this self-evident truth, when removed from the broader context of war’s sociopolitical causes, is just a meaningless banality. Thus, by concentrating on the personal experiences of hapless US soldier protagonists engaged in military conflict, many contemporary war films like *Lions for Lambs* and *Brothers* run the risk of conveying a highly ambiguous message. This perhaps accounts for why certain films ranging from *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) to the Israeli *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) have been embraced by members of otherwise bitterly opposed ideological camps. Is it any wonder, then, that one of the most thoroughly depoliticized films of the “war on terror” genre, *The Hurt Locker*, has also been one of its most successful?

By depoliticizing war and refusing to take a stand, such films resemble desperate attempts at achieving some sort of unbiased detachment in dealing with what is admittedly a very touchy subject. The problem with this supposed impartiality—or rather, what Herbert Marcuse called “spurious neutrality”—is that it is a myth.⁴ As the late Howard Zinn put it, “[T]he world is already moving in certain directions—many of them horrifying. Children are going hungry, people are dying in wars. To be neutral in such a situation is to collaborate with what is going on.”⁵ Likewise, the social and political currents that brought the US into its ongoing debacles in Afghanistan and Iraq are already flowing in certain directions, and to feign neutrality is to allow those currents to continue drifting in the same damaging ways. “True judiciousness,” as the ever-insightful Terry Eagleton once noted, “means taking sides.”⁶

What is needed, then, is for us to locate those films that take



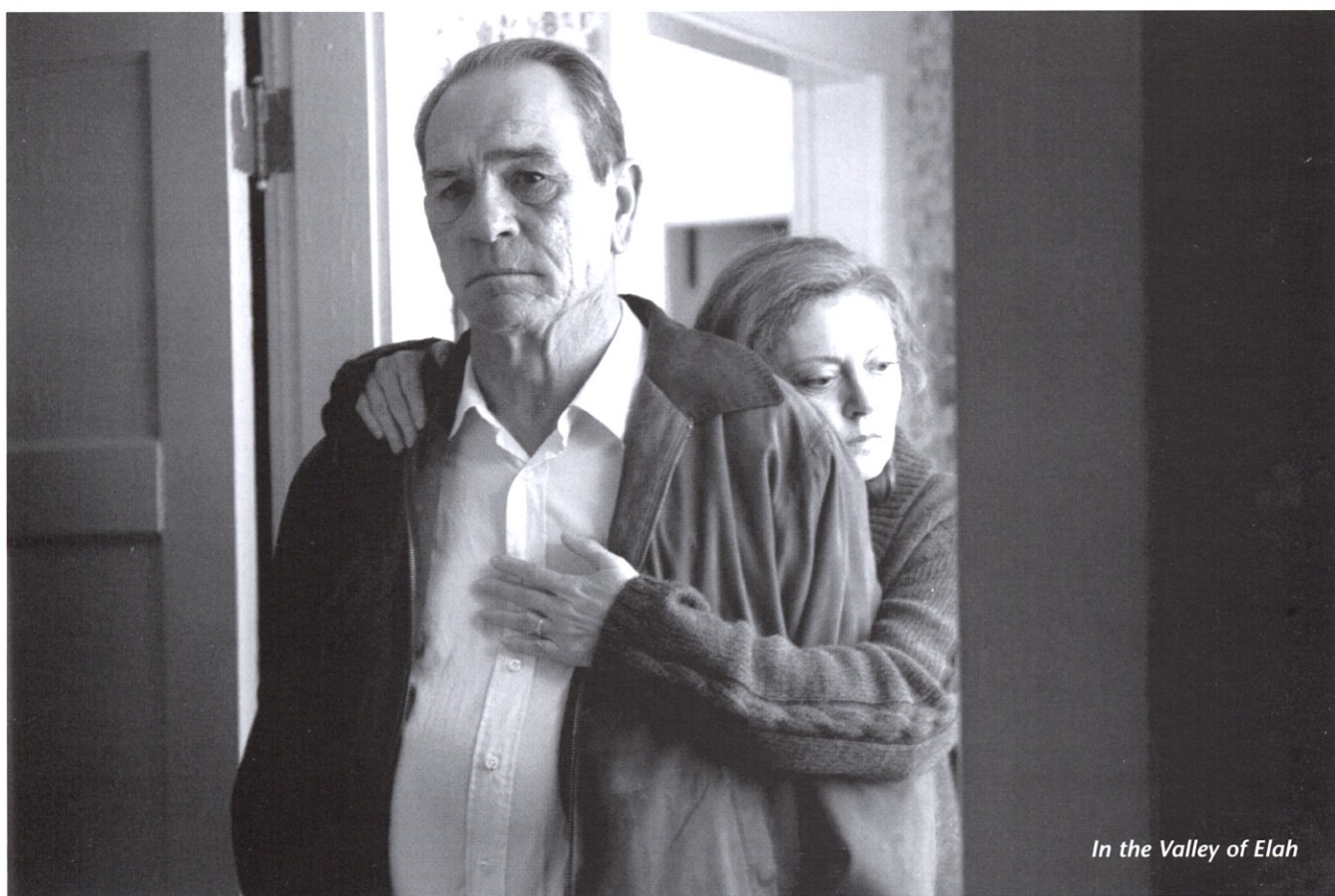
In the Valley of Elah



In the Valley of Elah



In the Valley of Elah



In the Valley of Elah



Rendition



Redacted

a radically progressive stand, carefully taking the same critical eye that is normally reserved for wars abroad and turning it inward to the societal structures behind US foreign affairs. The critique of such a film must not be limited to moral opposition alone. It must reach beyond that trite and universally accepted platitude—that war is hell—and explore the war's structural causes. Thus, it must transcend the constrictive ideological limits imposed by the narrative framework offered by the conventional modalities of the Hollywood war genre. Rather than *depoliticize* war, the ideal radical war film must instead *re-politicize* it.

At present, however, such a cinema does not exist. Thus, just as the public outcry against the Iraq War was proven to be powerless against the US military juggernaut, the appearance of the "war on terror" genre in and of itself does not necessarily indicate that a truly progressive critique of the status quo has passed into the mainstream. Indeed, many of these films—even those couched in overtly liberal terms—fail to criticize the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as anything more than misguided government policies. They seem unable, or perhaps unwilling, to connect the wars *out there* with the social structures *back home*—the very social structures, in fact, that caused those wars and policies in the first place.

This conceptual flaw is typified by *Rendition* (2007), a film which ends with its central protagonist—an American agent in North Africa—renouncing his torturous ways, rescuing a detainee from his torture cell, and putting him on a boat headed back to the US homeland. Curiously absent from this happy ending is the obvious problem that he is, in fact, sending his beleaguered captive to the very same country that had had him tortured to begin with. To not make this logical connection is either entirely dishonest or just plain delusional. Even Brian De Palma's hard-hitting *Redacted* (2007), with its relentless portrayal of war crimes on the part of individual US soldiers, remains limited in this respect. Ultimately, *Redacted* falls into the trap of scapegoating soldiers, presenting their actions as something divorced from civilized society. Once again, war is seen at the great corruptor and not society itself.

Returning, then, to the question of what the "war on terror" genre says about contemporary US society, we should not foster any optimistic illusions. Rather than indicating that society has undergone some tremendous upsurge of progressive political maturity in the decades since the Vietnam War, the existence of an audience for mainstream Hollywood films addressing today's foreign policy quagmires without really delving into their root causes seems instead to validate the view that we have entered a cynical age in which ideology functions at the level of action rather than thought. That the "war on terror" in general and the Iraq War in particular have material causes embedded within the very fabric of the American capitalist system is, after all, no secret. Indeed, this simple truth has been apparent since before the bombing of Baghdad even began, appearing in that most rudimentary and crude slogan emblazoned upon the protesters' placards: the four words, "no blood for oil."

Thus, the problem is not that today's liberals do not know what they are doing; rather, it is that they pretend not to know and continue doing it anyway. As Slavoj Žižek, summarizing Peter Sloterdijk, puts it in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, "[T]hey know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it."⁷ Or, to put it in contemporary political parlance, it is as if liberals are collectively saying, "I am against war, but neverthe-

less, I support Barack Obama." The inherent contradiction here, that the latter makes the former possible, seems not to matter.

Of course, in this time of foreign conflicts and color-coded terror alerts, no serious observer of Hollywood would really expect to see the mass production of a truly radical cinema. In the words of Robin Wood, "It is probably impossible today for anyone to make an even halfway commercial movie that shouts, in some positive sense, 'Revolution!' as loudly as its lungs can bear, so one must celebrate the films that seem (whether deliberately or not) to imply its necessity."⁸ If there has been one mass-marketed "war on terror" film that represents the first, crucial steps toward overturning the ideological limitations imposed by the traditional framework of the Hollywood war genre, it is *In the Valley of Elah* (2007).

With an all-star cast comprised of Hollywood A-list performers and a director, Paul Haggis, whose previous film, *Crash* (2004), won highest honors at the Academy Awards, one would have expected *Elah* to create a large splash upon its theatrical debut. Instead, the film took in dismal box office receipts. Not surprisingly, conservative pundits, who saw the film simply as anti-American "agitprop", reveled in its misfortune. Bill O'Reilly, for instance, quipped that the film was "in the valley of failure," and an Army veteran of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq opined in the neo-conservative *Weekly Standard* that such films were an affront to patriotic soldiers, serving only to "reassure my neighbors that even if I don't kill them or myself, I have surely committed horrible atrocities against women and children."⁹

While not all reviewers shared in this heated vitriol, even those who could peer beyond the conservative talking points often praised the film only for surface-level reasons: the performances of Tommy Lee Jones and Charlize Theron, the detective-like nature of the screenplay, the cinematography, Mark Isham's atmospheric score—that is, anything but the film's bold social statement. In this respect, a review posted on the website of the *Austin Chronicle* is telling. The reviewer saw in *Elah* three distinct movies: the first, a detective story; the second, a story of a father's grief; and the third, a sociopolitical critique. While the reviewer praised the first two, he rejected the third as unnecessary sociological theorizing on the part of writer-director Haggis. In other words, he praised the film only for the most superficial of reasons: its window dressing. Furthermore, the positive attention the film did receive was typically restrained. Lukewarm assessments reached the realm of the absurd when a reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times*, who nonetheless liked the film, lamented that it was not more like *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), the fast-paced, high-adrenaline action flick. Whereas *Elah* offered meat, this particular reviewer, it seems, simply wanted popcorn.¹⁰

But even those reviewers who did not flinch at *Elah's* biting commentary still, by and large, misunderstood the film's central concern. Indeed, reviewers of the film almost unanimously agreed that *Elah* was about the adverse effects of the Iraq War on our country's soldiers. In these reviews, the film's laborious meditation on some of the core features of the American experience—masculinity, military fetishism, and ethnic prejudices—is scarcely mentioned, and *Elah's* most heinous event—the inhuman murder of a young war veteran by his fellow soldiers—is symptomatic only of Iraq. For instance, a *New York Times* reviewer argued that *Elah's* "message is that the war in Iraq has damaged this country in ways we have only begun to

grasp." Similarly, a writer for *Rolling Stone* commented that the film was "about the humanity being sucked out of the soldiers we send there." Moreover, a reviewer for *Time* put it this way: "The Big Question asked by *In the Valley of Elah* [...] is this: What does a war without mercy or justification do to the young men and women who are obliged to fight it?" An even more succinct, if badly mistaken, summary was offered in the pages of *USA Today*: "The film is an exploration of the searing effects of the Iraq war on soldiers and their families."¹¹

Such views are rooted in a conceptual misunderstanding of the Iraq War itself. The assumption that our problems begin and end in Iraq is as false in reality as it is in the fictive world of *Elah*. Against such views, Haggis's film gives a number of indications that the problem actually goes much deeper. Thus, unlike several other "war on terror" films, *Elah* attacks American interventionism in the Middle East not simply as a failed or misguided policy decision but as a symptom of our society—or rather, what Erich Fromm would have called the "pathology of normalcy."¹² Indeed, the Iraq War represents neither an isolated event nor an altogether new phenomenon, and a subtle reminder that our society's historical sins precede Iraq appears in the guise of a curious decoration in the office of the police chief (Josh Brolin): a Native American headdress. Thus, *Elah* subverts the very values that films like *Brothers* seek to bolster, and it does so to a degree quite rarely achieved—or, for that matter, even attempted—in mainstream cinema; very few Hollywood films indeed close with the image of an American flag fluttering upside-down in the wind.

Elah follows the story of Hank Deerfield (Jones), a Vietnam veteran and retired military investigator, as he searches for answers to the questions surrounding his son's vicious murder. The film begins at Hank's home in Munro, Tennessee when Hank gets the news that his son Mike (Jonathan Tucker), a specialist in the army, has returned from Iraq only to go missing. The military suspects that Mike has gone AWOL, but Hank does not believe it. After exchanging a few brief words with his wife Joan (Susan Sarandon), Hank takes off to investigate his son's disappearance for himself.

Hank soon learns the vicious truth that his son was murdered, his body dismembered, burned, and left for scavengers in an abandoned field. The official investigation is marked by incompetence, bureaucratic red tape, and turf wars between the local police and the military. Determined to get to the bottom of his son's murder, Hank befriends a sympathetic police officer, Detective Emily Sanders (Theron), who helps him in his quest for answers.

Throughout the film, a number of possible culprits appear—Mexican gangs, drug-dealers, and a Latino soldier—but none of them amount to anything more than a red herring. Instead, the guilty party turns out to be one of Mike's friends and fellow soldiers, Corporal Steve Penning (Wes Chatham). As Penning later admits, a simple fight between drunken friends had, in a moment of heated frustration, turned deadly, and he had found himself stabbing his friend Mike over forty-two times. The cold callousness of this senseless killing is made all the more disturbing when, during his confession, the killer nonchalantly explains why he and his friends had left their fellow soldier's bloodied corpse exposed in the open field: "We would have buried the parts, but it was getting late and we hadn't eaten."

It is easy to blame the Iraq War for corrupting our young soldiers and making them indifferent to death. If *Elah* had left it

there, the film would not have been much different than any other liberal, anti-war film. Stories of shell-shocked veterans turning their war-time impulses upon their loved ones are rife. Most recently, a soldier in Washington State was accused of submitting his four-year-old daughter to water torture for failing to recite her ABCs.¹³ But to blame the war entirely for such actions without also looking at the responsibility of greater society is too easy, and *Elah*, to its credit, does not offer such simplistic answers. Instead, the film goes deeper, probing into the very fabric of US society. As Michael Bronski put it in his review of the film, "The rottenness runs so deep that no one is spared."¹⁴

To be sure, the Iraq War did contribute to the corruption of Mike and his fellow soldiers. This is evident not only in Mike's horrific murder, but also in the several videos recovered from his cell phone which are seen intermittently throughout the film. In one, Mike places a skateboard sticker on the charred head of an Iraqi corpse, treating it as if it were not once a human being but instead just some inanimate household object. In another video, we see Mike placing his bare fingers into the open wound of an Iraqi captive, asking him if it hurts and repeating the action again and again. Behind the piercing screams of the terrified Iraqi captive, we can hear Mike and his fellow soldiers laughing. Thus, for the Iraqi, it was torture, but for the young soldiers, it was just a game—one evidently repeated so much that it earned Mike the nickname "Doc."

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see *Elah*'s critique as being limited to the Iraq War alone. The social forces that corrupted Mike began long before his deployment abroad. They are part and parcel of the society within which he was born and raised. Throughout the film, Hank begins to realize this truth. Thus, in some respects, *Elah* is a film about a man coming to terms with the bankruptcy of his entire worldview, his ideological structuring. It is about Hank's awakening from the patriarchal and patriotic American fantasy.

In the beginning of the film, we see Hank working with his tools while his wife Joan does the laundry. An Uncle Sam poster is visible on the wall, and the red, white, and blue star-spangled banner hangs from the front porch. Hank, we eventually learn, takes the Bible literally and says grace before his meals. But conspicuously absent from this *Leave It to Beaver*-like picture is any warmth. Barely a word passes between husband and wife; they seem cold, detached, and distant. It is the film's first sign that all is not well within small town USA.

The initial coldness between Hank and his wife continues throughout the film, and as the gruesome details of Mike's death begin to emerge, Hank keeps her in the dark, rarely communicating with her. Disrespect in the home easily grows into disrespect elsewhere, and Hank's treatment of Joan as something less than equal is mirrored in Mike's behavior towards women. It is not that women did not play any role in the lives of Mike and his fellow soldiers; it is just that their role was limited mostly to the stripper's pole. Amongst Mike's usual hang-out spots were topless bars with trashy names like Pussy's. Indeed, the fight that eventually resulted in Mike's grisly murder began with Mike shouting lewd profanities at some of the female performers.

This gender bias is also apparent in the life of Detective Sanders. Her sexist male coworkers never take her seriously. Like classic bullies, they assign her tasks they deem unimportant as a way of keeping Sanders in her subservient place, and they open-

ly accuse her of trying to sleep her way to the top. Moreover, in investigating Mike's death, Sanders meets misogynist resistance at every turn—not only from her fellow police officers, but also from her boss, the Army, and even from Hank Deerfield.

Thus, *Elah* blends with its critique of US foreign policy a negative assessment of traditional gender relations, but it does not stop its social criticism there. *Elah* also scrutinizes the pervasive culture of military fetishism. Hank's painful phone conversation with Joan in which he relays the news of their son's death reveals her resentment for her husband's love of the military. Through tears and anguish, Joan voices her regret that Hank had ever encouraged Mike to join the armed forces. She says, "I seem to remember me being the one saying no when you [were] saying it'd be good for his character." An obviously distraught Hank pleads innocence, claiming that "Mike was the one who wanted to join. I sure as hell didn't encourage it." Joan rebuts, arguing that in their home environment, Mike could have done little else: "Living in this house he never could have felt like a man if he hadn't have gone." Again *Elah* seems to be saying that the road to Iraq started in the American home.

At several points in the film, it is suggested that Mike's murder may have come at the hands of a Mexican gang, the result of a drug deal gone bad. As Hank becomes ever more desperate to find his son's killer, he internalizes this possibility, allowing his own prejudices to dictate his actions. Hank becomes convinced that one of Mike's friends, a Latino soldier named Robert Ortiz, committed the heinous murder. Thus, largely on the basis of skin tone, Hank transfers his anger against one possible culprit—a yet undiscovered Mexican gang—to another.

Does not this prejudice have a close parallel in US foreign affairs? The ease in which the U.S.'s war of vengeance against one Muslim country (Afghanistan) was so easily transferred to a completely unrelated one (Iraq) speaks volumes about popular views towards a part of the world in which the various states and peoples are commonly lumped together as one homogeneously evil entity. Yet another parallel can also be seen in the domestic unease amongst certain strata of the U.S. public since the election of Barack Obama. Racism and ethnic prejudice are easy excuses for people facing real problems. This is as true for Hank Deerfield as it is for many of those protesters taking part in the so-called "Tea Party movement" who so easily allow their sometimes legitimate economic grievances to be channeled in the most destructive of ways: white supremacy and rage against Obama's Kenyan roots.

When Hank encounters Private Ortiz (Victor Wolf), weapon in hand, Ortiz draws a knife in self-defense, provoking a racist slur from Hank: "Fucking wetbacks. It's always knives, isn't it?" Later, after Ortiz is cleared of any charges and released from the police station, Hank insults him again, referring to him as "Chico" and calling him a "wetback prick". Ortiz responds with what is simultaneously one of the most chillingly delivered and insightful lines from the film: "Wouldn't it be funny if the Devil looked just like you?"

Ortiz's words contain a rather simple lesson, both for Hank and for those US citizens who are pondering their country's various wars of "liberation". If we want to discover the true culprit, we would do well to begin by interrogating ourselves. Thus, whereas many other films demonize the ethnic Other, *Elah* exonerates it, and the guilty party is instead eventually identified as a product of normality itself—that is, a white, all-

American soldier who has been corrupted, not by war alone, but by the militarist and masculinist cultural norms of a society that sends its children into imperialist wars.

Throughout most of the film, Hank refuses to suspect Mike's army buddies of any wrongdoing. The idea that good American soldiers could so viciously turn on each other goes against everything Hank believes, and he dismisses it out of hand, refusing even to entertain the possibility. In this respect, Hank allows himself to remain blinded by his ideological structuring. A similar refusal is seen in Private Ortiz's reaction to Hank's question about a video Mike had taken in which the soldiers ran their vehicle over what appears to have been an Iraqi child. "Some guys said we hit a kid. I don't believe it," Ortiz says, suppressing tears. "You ask me, we hit a dog." Reality, as it is often said, is a bitter pill to swallow.

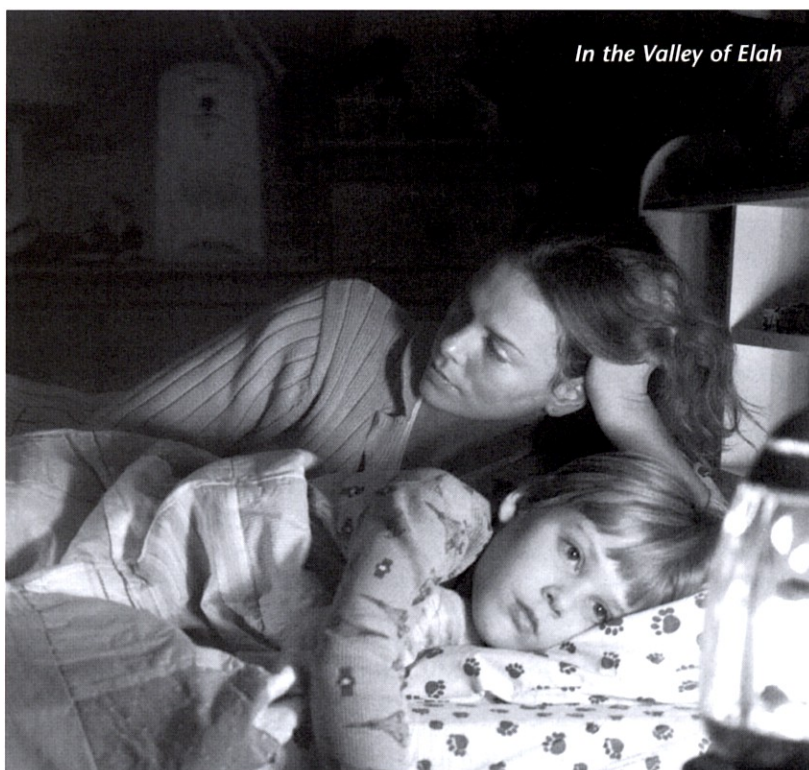
Interrogating one's own worldview is never an easy process, and it is usually quite painful. But doing so is the first step towards maturity. Gradually, throughout the film, Hank begins to peel back the layers of the mythology with which he has always interpreted the world and looks at the vulgar reality that had previously been concealed. This is evident in the way Hank begins to lose himself. At the beginning of the film, Hank is still very much a military man. He's an early riser who fastidiously shaves his face, shines his shoes, and makes his bed. As the film progresses and Hank gradually begins to lose faith in all that he believes, these areas of his life also start to collapse. This begins when Hank cuts himself shaving on the very day he is to learn of his son's demise. Eventually, he starts sleeping later and stops caring about the tidiness of his bed sheets.

Hank's final abandonment of his ideological worldview is symbolized in the radical change of his attitude towards the US flag. At the beginning of the film, he notices a flag hanging upside down from a pole near his home. This apparent misdeed turns out to be an honest mistake by an immigrant from El Salvador. Hank shows him how to properly raise the flag and explains that hanging it upside down is an "international distress signal" that "means we're in a whole lot of trouble so come save our ass because we don't have a prayer in hell to save it ourselves." After returning home at the end of the film, Hank's attitude is radically different. He wakes up one morning and goes to that same pole, taking with him a US flag that Mike had sent him from Iraq. He then proceeds to fly the flag upside down, securing it with duct tape to prevent others from easily taking it down. Hank has given up and apparently believes that his home, his country, and his society are in a state of extreme distress.

There seems to have been much confusion regarding the film's central metaphor, the epic battle of David and Goliath which—according to the account preserved in the biblical book of 1 Samuel—took place in the Valley of Elah. Most reviewers of the film stated their belief that this metaphor points directly to Hank Deerfield's struggle for truth and justice in the face of Goliath-like odds. As one reviewer put it, *Elah* "fixates on the David and Goliath myth [...], going for the overused metaphor to make its point about how good men have to stand up for their principles." Even Douglas Kellner, in his otherwise insightful *Cinema Wars*, makes the same mistake, arguing that "the metaphor highlights Deerfield's fight to uncover the truth against the military criminal justice system and a malignant state apparatus."¹⁵

What such reviews miss, however, is that Hank does not

represent David. Instead, this metaphor is directed towards a person who, although occupying very little screen time, is actually one of the most important characters of the film: Detective Sanders' son (Devin Brochu) who, not coincidentally, bears the same name as that ancient Israelite king. David Sanders offers us the reverse image of Hank's son Mike. While Mike was reared in a home of religious tales, military love, and male domination, David is being raised by a single mother who is not particularly devout. In contrast to the competitive, pro-military environment of the Deerfields' home, she refrains from actively encouraging David's participation in sports. This latter fact is seen as something of a defect by her male boss. When she admits candidly that David is "pretty pathetic at every sport he attempts," her boss responds, "that's a damn shame." But just because David is not appreciated by society does not mean he is a failure. To the contrary, the fact that he does not measure up in the eyes of Detective Sanders' male peers may actually be a good thing, and by eschewing the norms, David's non-traditional upbringing might just represent our greatest prospect for positive social change.



In the Valley of Elah



Twice in the film, the story of David and Goliath is related to David. The first such occasion takes place while Hank is trying to put David to bed. After fumbling an awkward attempt at reading a bedtime story, Hank recounts the biblical tale. Hank, clearly disappointed that David has never heard the story before ("You're named after King David. Your mother didn't tell you that? Well, it figures."), tells it as if he were reporting the battlefield tactics of Gettysburg or Iwo Jima. He treats the tale as a lesson in bravery and manliness, an instruction manual for fighting the various "monsters" of the world, and David listens attentively. We can imagine Hank telling this same story to his son Mike many moons ago. The story has quite an effect on David, and the next day, Detective Sanders informs Hank that her son has begun asking for a slingshot.

The second time we hear the story, it is through the mouth of Detective Sanders. At the end of the film, she lies in bed with her son and recounts the same celebrated tale. This time, however, David interrupts with a question of his own: "Why would they let him fight a giant? He was just a boy." This atypical response is nevertheless quite appropriate. While the story of David and Goliath, as it is normally told, is one of bravery, faith, and the triumph of the underdog, in *Elah* it functions as a wake-up call, challenging us to rethink the militaristic masculine aggression that plagues our society, be it in the form of religious fables or football fandom. In contrast to typical responses to the story of David and Goliath which focus on heroism and faith, Detective Sanders' son seems to be asking a much more fundamental question: what kind of society would send its young to fight in such battles to begin with?

There has been a tendency in recent years to explain modern-day political problems as something other than what they really are. Following the example set by political officials, media personalities, certain religious leaders, and perhaps even the cinema, many of us have substituted myth for reality, locating the source of today's troubles in cultural differences—an attitude which serves ultimately to conceal our own guilt. In the wake of 9/11, such exculpatory explanations became all too prevalent. Articles by notable writers like Francis Fukuyama, John Keegan, Bernard Lewis, Norman Podhoretz, Fareed Zakaria, and even Salman Rushdie appeared on newsstands, boasting such inflammatory titles as "Their Target: The Modern World," "Yes, This is About Islam," and "What Went Wrong?" Like Samuel Huntington's infamous clash of civilizations thesis before them, these opportunistic peddlers of propagandistic provocation offered a grieving populace a convenient and easy scapegoat: the Muslim Middle East.

This is, of course, not to say that the 9/11 hijackers were not from that region. Nor is it to suggest that Islamic fundamentalism played no role in the heinous attacks. Islamic fundamentalism, like other fundamentalist movements, thrives on the wrongs and injustices endured by an impoverished people—ones which, in fact, emanate not from some primordial cultural differences but instead from the economic disparities exacerbated by global capitalism. Thus, looking for answers to today's political problems in foreign cultures is exactly what we should not be doing. To understand the 9/11 attacks, the global "war on terror", or even the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, one need not be an expert on Afghan or Arab cultural customs; rather, one should instead look to American imperial power.

The drive after 9/11 amongst some of the general public,

then, to read copies of the Quran and educate themselves about Middle Eastern cultures was just a distraction. Slavoj Žižek has made this same, very important point; "probing into different cultural traditions is precisely *not* the way to grasp the political dynamics which led to the September 11 attacks." He concludes that "the only way to conceive of what happened on September 11 is to locate it in the context of the antagonisms of global capitalism."¹⁶

In searching for a film that perfectly encapsulates this insight, *In the Valley of Elah* falls short. That is, it never really blames capitalism directly for the continued US involvement in Iraq and elsewhere. Nevertheless, in this time of looking ever outward, *Elah* provides a rare and much needed example of a film that suggests instead we look inward, that the answers to today's pressing political problems and foreign policy quagmires lie within the structure of our own society. If a responsible war cinema is ever to emerge, the filmmakers behind it would do well to study closely the example of this most underappreciated film.

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Notes

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Refiguring Rambo

COMPETING IMPERATIVES
IN THE HIGH CONCEPT WAR FILM

by HARRISON GISH

Of all the films produced during the 1980s to engage the Vietnam War, George Pan Cosmatos' 1985 Sylvester Stallone vehicle, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, stands today as the preeminent example of the United States's ill-fated conflict writ large through Hollywood's strategy of visually excessive high concept film production. Of course, warfare and its representation have long been key narrative and generic elements in Hollywood cinema, evident in the work of DW Griffith, whose historical Babylonian battle scenes in *Intolerance* (1916) were the epitome of cinematic spectacle at the time, and in the more recent spate of fantastical blockbuster films, particularly Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003). The 1980s witnessed a unique conflation of warfare's filmic representation, as the Vietnam War, a real event still prominent in national memory, found itself narratively reconstructed as a fantasy playground for seemingly superhuman, hypermasculine individuals that could single-handedly bring apparent closure to a national, political and military failure beset with trauma. While Chuck Norris freed military prisoners from Vietnam in *Missing in Action* (Joseph Zito, 1984) and both Patrick Swayze and Charlie Sheen defended the United States against a Communist invasion in *Red Dawn* (John Milius, 1984), Sylvester Stallone's turn as John Rambo epitomized the subgenre, with *Rambo: First Blood Part II* being the most financially lucrative and visually excessive film in the 1980s high concept war film cycle.¹

The marketing of *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, specifically the



Rambo: First Blood Part II

widely disseminated, instantly recognizable image, displayed on posters and one sheets, of Stallone wielding a rocket launcher and displaying his abundant musculature, intimated the film's focus on war and violence as well as the "strength, readiness, [and] dominance" of the macho male body prior to the film's release.² As an unprecedented worldwide success, a true blockbuster, *Rambo* gained enough prominence that Ronald Reagan lauded the film's ability to inform his foreign policy. Simultaneously, *Rambo's* popularity instigated debates in the liberal press and academic journals over the coming of the "Age of Rambo" and the overabundance of fantastical violence the film celebrated.³ In such discourse, *Rambo* was reviewed and criticized as a paean to the effectiveness of warfare in solving international political conflicts, as an exceptionally conservative film that blamed liberalism for the loss of Vietnam, and as a document of extreme narcissism, all too blatant in its fetishizing of male physical dominance and a new beefcake masculinity.⁴

Such an immediate apprehension of the film is understandable—as a high concept action spectacular designed to promote a high box office return, *Rambo*, in both its marketing campaign and its construction of filmic narrative, appeals to simplicity, blatancy, and legibility. As Yvonne Tasker notes, this blatancy within 1980s action cinema has led to the categorization of these films as "monolithic", inciting knee-jerk dismissal and outright vehemence on the part of both the liberal press and the "cine-literate".⁵ However, Tasker contends that such films are by no means as simplistic as they first appear, and exemplify a multitude of at-times-competing discourses concerning politics, national identity, race and gender relations, and masculinity. This essay proposes a critical rereading and refiguring of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* as a political film unable to reconcile its two main imperatives, namely a vindication of brute force and heavy militarism as viable international policy and an utter rejection of governmental authority through an endorsement of a primitive and savage individualized masculinity. This irreconcilable collision of competing political invectives will be shown to play out across three registers, specifically the plot and character establishment within the film's diegesis, the visual indulgence of the hypermasculine body in crisis, and the film's inscription of cultural otherness. *Rambo*, born both from bureaucratic, societal mistrust and an intense jingoism, unwittingly works to undermine the exceptionally conservative outlook for which the film was originally vilified.

In this way, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* epitomizes a conflict apparent in numerous Hollywood films that represent the United States's involvement in international military conflict. While validating the use of force as an effective diplomatic tool that emboldens and strengthens the nation on an international scale, these films simultaneously display warfare's detrimental effects, both physical and mental, to the individuals involved, a trauma that leads these proponents of war to question and challenge the nation for which they fight. As a War Film, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* ultimately endorses a militaristic international outlook within which its titular war hero cannot himself survive, promoting a state of incessant military preparedness that evacuates the idealized, individualized image of the singular war hero the film so forcefully constructs.

Rambo's Political Discourse

To summarize in brief, *Rambo's* narrative is one of vengeance: vengeance against the Vietnamese, as well as Communist nations in general: vengeance against a United States government more interested in political posturing than honoring its missing soldiers; and vengeance against the Vietnam veteran's wartime experience. In the film, John Rambo returns with his commanding officer, Colonel Samuel Trautman (Richard Crenna), to Vietnam, to the very prison camp where Rambo himself previously survived as a prisoner of war. Under the command of Marshall Murdock (Charles Napier), Chief of Special Operations in Vietnam, Rambo is given the task of scouting the Vietnamese prison camp for missing POWs. Dropped into Vietnam, Rambo meets with Vietnamese rebel Co Bao (Julia Nickson), who hires a boat and leads Rambo to the camp, where he quickly discovers a handful of caged American soldiers.⁶ Freeing one, Rambo returns to the agreed-upon rendezvous, only to find that Murdock has abandoned him, the politician not willing to face the consequences of publicizing the existence of US prisoners still held in Vietnam. Captured and tortured at the hands of the Vietcong and their Russian commander Lieutenant Colonel Podovsky (Steven Berkoff), Rambo escapes, obliterating the prison camp and the Vietnamese and Russian infantry. After witnessing Co's death and braving a helicopter battle with Podovsky, Rambo returns with the prisoners of war to Murdock's base of operations in Thailand, where he confronts his bureaucratic nemesis. Ultimately, Rambo resigns himself to the Thailand wilderness,



disgusted with the United States government's lack of gratitude for the sacrifices he and his fellow soldiers have made during the Vietnam War.

Rambo's screenplay, written by Sylvester Stallone and James Cameron, can clearly be divided into three acts, each, according to Gregory A. Waller, associated with a different narrative schema, specifically "the quest, the story of escape, and the revenge story".⁷ Each act contains several scenes that can be read as overtly political, through both their deployment of visual symbolism iconic of America and their indulgence, through onscreen dialogue, of incisive and highly partisan diatribes concerning the efficacy of political and military action related to the Vietnam War. These expressions, both visual and aural, function as what Michael Billig has termed "banal nationalisms".⁸ In Billig's conception, "banal nationalisms" are symbols focused upon visually within a film or thematic elements that recur within the plot that relate to a specific nation, and work to evoke the idea of the nation itself through their deployment. In the aforementioned scenes, the characters overtly discuss the United States as a nation, noting the country's unique culture, which Rambo himself describes as being monolithically opposed to the Vietnam War and its veterans, and the country's international presence, with the failure of Vietnam and the government's role therein a frequent topic of debate between Trautman and Murdock. Evoked verbally during these conversations, the idea of the United States as a nation is also presented symbolically. The *mise-en-scènes* of such sequences are rife with visual symbols that cue national recognition, from the American flags evident in the Thailand military base to the Coca-Cola vending machine present in Murdock's office. Through both iconic visuals and polemical dialogue, *Rambo* doubly focuses its critical discourse concerning the Vietnam War's failure on the United States as a national entity. Such incisive criticism of the United States's wartime actions becomes apparent immediately, at the very moment the film begins.

In the first scene of *Rambo*, John Rambo appears as a prisoner in an American jail doing hard time for his actions in the original *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), in which Rambo, a returning veteran, fought back against a police force that vilified and summarily terrorized him due to his veteran status. Rambo's mentor and trainer, Colonel Trautman, cast as a protective father figure within both films, appears to negotiate Rambo's release, on the terms that Rambo return to the Vietnamese prison camp in which he was previously held and tortured during the war so as to orchestrate the rescue of contemporary American prisoners. Accepting the mission, Rambo asks Trautman, "Do we get to win this time?" to which Trautman responds, "This time, it's up to you". As Gregory A. Waller discusses, the use of the pronoun "we" in this establishing pre-credit dialogue implicates not only the veterans whom Rambo is to rescue, but also the American public that watched the war unfold, and the audience that now watches the film itself, binding the viewer into corroborating Rambo's goal of winning a war previously lost.⁹ Trautman's response, that the outcome and potential victory of a war concluded during the previous decade lies in the hands of a single individual, known specifically for his combat proficiency and ability to obliterate the enemy, foregrounds early on within *Rambo* a notion that only militaristic strength and hardened determination can solve international conflicts otherwise lost.

This discourse on both the effectiveness and the nobility of

military might is echoed in a later confrontation between Trautman and Murdock, a politician, referred to derisively as a "bureaucrat", running Rambo's search and rescue operation. Murdock aborts Rambo's rescue from the Vietnamese military, revealing that the mission is a sham to save face politically. While Trautman argues that with determination and a display of military force both Rambo's current mission and the Vietnam War itself could be successful, Murdock retaliates that the complexity of political interests and motives behind the war do not allow for the direct action Trautman proposes and Rambo symbolizes. A government more sensitive to its public appearance than to the lives of its infantrymen displaces and renders ineffective the heroic zeal of never relenting and staying the course.

While casting military action as both heroic and effective, Trautman's argument with Murdock also works to vilify bureaucracy and the political proponents of strict governmental oversight as caring for neither the sanctity of human life nor the brotherhood and unity of the military. Philippa Gates, writing on combat films in the New Hollywood, notes the appearance of two cycles of war films during the 1980s, the 'revenge film,' which *Rambo* typifies, where a lone soldier resolves a conflict his political superiors have lost, and the 'realism film,' where the chaos of war and the lack of solidarity within the military lead to both the loss of the protagonist's innocence and the military conflict, as in Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986).¹⁰ While Trautman vocalizes Rambo's unrelenting, uncompromising attitude as not only effective international policy but as a humane and decent method of warfare which acknowledges the sacrifice of others, Murdock, concerned with the image of the United States's political leaders, actively subverts his soldiers' successes in the aim of gaining the bureaucratic high ground. By aborting Rambo's rescue mission, referring to the imprisoned POWs as "forgotten ghosts", and disclosing to Trautman that he considers Rambo not one of "our men" but an expendable asset beholden to Trautman alone, a "tool" in the "machine" of military strategy, Murdock is positioned in *Rambo* as the catalyst for the breakdown of military brotherhood and solidarity. Indeed, in *Rambo*, Murdock is solely positioned as the cause of the interior conflict that Gates' 'realism' cycle portrays as the true failure of Vietnam.

Such politically charged verbal exchanges in *Rambo* support a militarized foreign policy of direct action while exposing bureaucracy as amoral in its use of soldiers as grist for a political image-making mill, responsible for destroying troop morale and subsequently losing the war. Numerous elements of *Rambo's* plot construction, while not presented as partisan diatribe, also actively promote a jingoistic, xenophobic attitude indebted to stereotype and cultural reductionism, concurrently supporting increased militarism. Most notable here are the depictions of the narrative's antagonists with whom Rambo must do battle, the North Vietnamese soldiers and the Russians who command them.

***Rambo* and the Cultural Other**

In its portrayal of different ethnicities and nationalities, *Rambo* frequently glosses over individuation, instead creating faceless masses that can quickly be turned into fodder for Rambo's vengeance in the film's violent action scenes. Such reductionism works to both individualize Rambo as far more than an ordinary soldier and allows both the film and its audience to make quick generalizations about the multiple nationalities



Rambo: First Blood Part II

that constitute the Communist threat to the United States during the Cold War. In its typing of multiple nationalities as cultural and national Others to the US population and as imminently threatening American lives, *Rambo* utilizes cultural generalization to promote paranoia about foreign intentionality, ultimately supporting heightened military alertness. This alertness, a continual preparedness to go to war that the film supports through its depictions of all cultural Others as military threats, is personified in the figure of Rambo himself. Indeed, Rambo perceives not only the Vietnamese military, but also Vietnamese civilians, as potential enemies. Rambo's continual preparedness is constructed personally and historically, when he tells Trautman, referring to the Vietnam War, "Sir, I'm still alive, so it's still alive". Much as Rambo refuses to change over time, so to do the Vietnamese characters within the film, all of whom are portrayed as exceedingly eager to enact violence, justifying Rambo's heightened awareness through their own devious actions.

Cultural stereotyping is perhaps most evident in *Rambo's* portrayal of the Vietnamese who hold the POWs captive. As none of the Vietcong speak English, the film effectively evacuates the possibility of the Vietnamese soldiers verbally defending their actions, and the viewer is instead left thematic motifs that portray these characters as reprehensible and underhanded. In the two scenes in the film where Vietnamese officers are portrayed off duty, they are shown fraternizing with prostitutes, a weakness that renders them lax in their ability to be effective soldiers. Indeed, Co breaks into the prison camp by dressing as

a prostitute, fooling the guards into granting her access to a restricted military base. Rambo, meanwhile, is able to sneak past the guards undetected while they fornicate. As well, the crew of the ferry that takes Rambo upriver, also Vietnamese but not soldiers, betray him and attempt to turn him over to the Vietcong, disclosing their willingness to act dishonorably in the hope for increased profit. *Rambo* paints the Vietnamese in broad strokes, construing both officers and civilians as weak-willed and untrustworthy.

The faceless nature of the Vietnamese soldiers finds an odd mirror in the racial constitution of the POWs Rambo rescues. While the film reductively depicts the Vietnamese in an explicitly stereotypical fashion, the soldiers appearing diminutive in size in comparison to Rambo's enormous frame, the POWs appear entirely Caucasian, portrayed as tough survivors unwilling to succumb to their tormenters.¹¹ Not only does this lack of diversity stand as an inaccurate portrayal of the multi-ethnic composition of American troops serving in the Vietnam War, but also it classes the Vietnam War's American victims as entirely white, devoid of racial difference. This conception of the American military as racially unified in its composition in turn renders the other foreign villains of the film, the Russians, more insidious and threatening in nature. While Colonel Podovsky tortures Rambo, he continually makes assertions of friendship toward his captive, calling Rambo "comrade" and appealing to his rationality, and concurrently discussing the Vietnamese he commands as both primitive and barbaric. The threat Podovsky poses, with his Caucasian features returned to con-



Colonel Podovsky tortures Rambo

tinually in close-up, is that he may successfully penetrate into American culture unnoticed through claims of unity and amiability, a fear of Communism dating back to McCarthyism in the 1940s.

While playing upon the visually evident racial differences between the Vietnamese and other nationalities, inscribing the Russian enemies as more threatening due to their physical resemblance to a Caucasian America and ability to apprehend American customs, *Rambo* also vilifies its antagonists through their resemblance to the villains of pre-1980s Hollywood war films. The uniforms the Vietnamese soldiers wear directly recall Japanese uniforms from the Second World War, while the insidious threats and efficient control the Russians display evoke comparisons to Nazi villainy.¹² As such, *Rambo* inscribes the Russian and Vietnamese characters as hailing from a long tradition of threatening Otherness, borrowing on the generic traditions of its war film forebears to doubly encode the Communists as a menace. Not only do the Communists threaten the lives of Rambo and the POWs, but also they are visually and thematically constructed as successors to the United States's enemies during the nation's former military conflicts. That *Rambo* compounds the Communist threat so directly, portraying the Vietcong as blindly obedient to the Soviet military and uniting two highly differentiated socialist nations in an orchestrated international effort to undermine the global efficacy of the United States, underlines the film's belief that US sovereignty is threatened by a global cabal of Others which only increased militarism can neutralize.

The Hypermasculine Body in Crisis

In *Rambo's* portrayal of military engagement and warfare as effective means to both defend and redeem America, the film concurrently rejects notions of femininity in favor of a hard-line masculinity necessary for the physical dominance war entails. Aside from the film's heavy penchant for phallic symbolism intimating masculine supremacy, most notable in the enormous knife Rambo uses to penetrate his enemies, *Rambo* also portrays the United States as a nation primed for physical and cultural dominance through brute force. While the only scene in the film to take place in the United States occurs in a rock quarry prison camp, where harsh physical labor is a necessity, Co, the one female character in the film, discusses her hope to move to America and live "the quiet life", a style of living not once on display within the film. While *Rambo's* depiction of hard labor contests Co's conception of the United States as promoting a life of ease, Rambo intones that the society Co imagines finds him "expendable". Co's hope to someday enjoy an America in which Rambo and the unmitigated militarism he represents are obsolete results in the utter rejection of her ideals of peace and quietude: immediately after Rambo agrees to bring Co to America with him, after she has aided his escape from Colonel Podovsky's torture chamber, she is shot to death. Instead, the hard-line masculinity and sheer physical strength Rambo embodies is vindicated as a state of military preparedness necessary for the United States to function globally.

Rambo's cultural imperative for a return to masculine values is most frequently expressed within the film's visual fetishizing

of Stallone's heavily embellished body.¹³ Early in the film, before Rambo even enters Vietnam, his body becomes the focus of numerous extreme close-ups. In a telling moment in Murdock's office, Rambo's enormous hand manipulates a satellite photo of the prison camp, anticipating his future destruction of the camp through intense physical force. As well, immediately before entering Vietnam, in a montage of Rambo preparing for battle, an extreme close-up traces the individual veins in Rambo's arm, the tracking shot ending on the enormous blade he holds in his palm. At such a diminished focal distance, these images begin to lose instant legibility; much as Rambo will physically overwhelm his enemies during combat, he also physically overwhelms the frame of the film itself.

While the early shots of Rambo's musculature encourage a spectatorial awe with the protagonist's physicality, the scenes of debasing physical torture that appear later transform this awe into disgust. In contemporary analyses of the scenes where Rambo's Russian captors mercilessly electrocute him, Stallone's writhing body and bulging, charged muscles have been discussed as signifying both the power of masculinity itself and the labor and dedication to physicality necessary to create such a hyper-stylized figure.¹⁴ As Yvonne Tasker notes, such visual displays of physical power signal that masculinity itself is in crisis within American culture, as such performances of strength and bodily dominance attempt to actively reform a culture perceived as overly feminized.¹⁵ In such scenes, physical strength becomes not only the visual focus of the film, but also allows the character to survive the bodily harm perpetrated against him. Clearly, *Rambo* appeals to the notion that masculine strength is necessary for perseverance in the face of the conflicts the film purports threaten America.

Indeed, the scene in which Podovsky tortures Rambo not only works to justify the brutal comeuppance Rambo metes out during the final action set piece of the film, but also displays the savagery the protagonist must embrace to succeed in his mission. While Tasker discusses the torture of the physically endowed male protagonist as a testament to his ability to survive while allowing the viewer to marvel at his obvious strength and hypermasculinity, the torture scene in *Rambo* turns the protagonist's physique grotesque, an object less to be admired than reviled.¹⁶ Electrocuted, caught in a state of seizure where his muscles strain wildly, Stallone's body ceases to be a source of visual pleasure. Instead, as his muscles spasm and undulate, the pain Rambo experiences becomes visually inscribed on his body. Indeed, during the torture scene, Rambo's knife, a symbol of physical violence and masculine power, is turned against him, Rambo's Russian captors cutting his face so as to give him "a memento of this occasion", according to Podovsky. Here, a fetish object for masculinity becomes a visual testament to the physically abject, Stallone's impossible musculature utterly dehumanized, a vessel for amoral physical violence. In turn, the debasement of both Rambo's body as purveyor of pleasure and of Rambo himself through the inhumane treatment he suffers allow him to embrace an animalistic savagery, overcoming his captors by embracing the nature of the primitive beast they treat him as.

Rambo, Cultural Embodiment, and Physical Violence

Considering *Rambo's* paean to military strength and physical dominance, its celebration of those characters that espouse a forceful, unrelenting foreign policy, and its deployment of cul-

tural stereotypes promoting a quick recognition and revulsion toward its antagonists, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* invokes a conservative perspective that rejects liberalism and the feminization of American culture. However, while the film *Rambo* exudes the hope for an isolated, masculinized, militaristic society that can deal swiftly and effectively with its foes, this polemical discourse finds itself problematized by its very protagonist. John Rambo himself eventually eschews the militarized American society the film covets, his character, utilized through the film as an exemplar of the narrative's conservative viewpoint, embodying disparities unpalatable to the unified, racially homogenous, authoritative militarism the film champions.

In *Rambo's* early scenes, John Rambo is effectively revealed as the apotheosis of warfare, an 'army of one' in the flesh. Defending Rambo to Murdock, Trautman describes his soldier as "a pure fighting machine, with only a desire to win a war someone else lost". When Murdock lies about his own service in Vietnam, Rambo reveals to Trautman that the battalion Murdock claims to have overseen was not stationed where the Chief of Special Operations described, displaying that his own knowledge of the Vietnam War exceeds that of both a politician orchestrating military conflict and his own commanding officer, a decorated colonel. As a protagonist wielding unstoppable combat prowess and detailed historical knowledge of the Vietnam War, Rambo appears to typify the film's call for unrelenting warfare as the key to persevering through international conflict. However, *Rambo's* construction of its titular character quickly places him at a remove from the military industrial complex he serves.

While *Rambo*, as a film, engages in vast simplification and stereotyping of foreign cultures while positing an America unencumbered by racial difference, Rambo himself is cast as a cultural Other. Murdock, reviewing Rambo's military file, comments on his mixed cultural heritage, half German and half Native American, "a hell of a combination", according to the politician. Such exposition uniquely unites in Rambo the nationality of the United States's enemy in the two World Wars with a culture obliterated during the nation's formation. Rambo's victimization as a prisoner of war in Vietnam and as an incarcerated veteran in the United States mirrors the oppression of Rambo's cultural heritage at the hands of the nation he fights to defend. While the United States and its military have created Rambo, they have also imprisoned and subjugated him. Indeed, Rambo can be perceived as a prisoner throughout the film, either in a US stateside penitentiary, a Vietnamese camp, or on a mission intentionally doomed to failure. When Murdock betrays Rambo, justifying his actions as an attempt to bolster the United States government's public image, it is a betrayal by the nation the character has already experienced countless times, within both his personal and ancestral history.

Multiple scholars have commented that Rambo's Native American heritage not only disassociates him from the military he serves, but is the actual character element that allows him to claim victory over an entire army of foes.¹⁷ While the Native American in combat is specifically invoked when Rambo uses a bow-and-arrow to dispatch his Vietnamese enemies, his ability to utilize the jungle terrain bespeaks an awareness of the natural world associated with Native American culture and absent in capitalist, industrialized society. When fighting Russian soldiers, Rambo uses tree vines to drag his opponents toward him or waits to attack them camouflaged and perfectly concealed in

mud. In this way, *Rambo* combines in its protagonist the Native American's stereotyped awareness of the natural world with the embellished violence of warfare, removing the spirituality of the former and transmuting it into barbaric hostility.

In its depiction of violence, *Rambo* foregrounds a primitive savagery that disavows the strategizing military conflict necessities. Rambo utilizes not only the jungle to his advantage in battle, but is also able to weaponize any object for the purposes of violence, as when he escapes his Russian captors by attacking them with a microphone. Frequently Rambo turns his enemies' weapons against them, commandeering both a Russian helicopter and Vietnamese heavy artillery to effect his victory. Within the action scenes, Rambo physically dominates his foes, enveloping them beneath his massive frame before executing them. Indeed, Rambo resembles a cross between *Apocalypse Now's* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) Colonel Kurtz and the alien villain in *Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987), utilizing the jungle to both hunt and create fear in his enemies, graphically executing them as they are overwhelmed by his excessive physical strength. Symbolic of a past fraught with victimization and a cultural otherness that places him at a remove from the nation he defends, while displaying a cunning savagery that is both bestial and animalistic, Rambo is the United States's repressed returned with guns ablaze, becoming the arbiter of the physical domination and subjection that created him.

Though Rambo emerges successful at the film's close, utterly annihilating his Vietnamese and Russian enemies and rescuing the POWs, he cannot be accepted back into either the culture he defends or the military complex whose proponent he is. In a final shot that recalls the close of numerous Westerns, with the lone hero heading into the sunset, Rambo physically turns his back on Trautman, his symbolic father and commanding officer, as well as the military's base of operations and the film's audience, visually rejecting and distancing himself from the militarized society the film covets and the consumer audience with which the film found its popularity. It is here that *Rambo's* argument for aggressive militarized foreign policy collapses in on itself. To make such a policy effective, to see international conflicts through to the bitter end with little more than displays of strength and might, to engage in warfare unencumbered by political stipulations or guiding principles, is to dehumanize oneself beyond reconciliation. The brute strength, prowess and self-determination necessary to wage warfare to such an overwhelming degree individualizes the persons involved to the point where functioning within the military complex, which heralds unity and solidarity, becomes an impossibility. The political discourse on offer in *Rambo* denies its own viability, victimizing the very hero it hopes will usher in a new militarism and revealing that its tactics of domination and subjugation of the enemy closely mirror those actions of the cultural Other the film claims to despise.

Rambo: First Blood Part II, as a War Film, depicts visually and narratively the competing intentions of this broad cinematic genre, particularly the subgenre which *Rambo* epitomizes, the actual historical tragedy rewritten through filmic fantasy. An initial reading of the film would determine that, this time, Rambo did indeed "get to win", effectively rescuing POWs, and symbolically destroying the multinational Communist threat to the United States. On further analysis, however, it becomes clear that bringing closure to a tumultuous national past is the very opposite of *Rambo's* political, national aspirations. Much as

when the character Rambo states that, since he is still alive, Vietnam and the war within are still alive, the film itself resurrects an event in the national past, not so much to provide catharsis to those individuals the war so affected as to obliterate and rewrite that history entirely. In turn, *Rambo* effectively keeps the conflict "alive" and uses the rewritten national past to validate a jingoism founded upon constant military preparedness. However, much like the Vietnam War itself, *Rambo's* intentions appear unclear to the film's own purveyors, who effectively eliminate the film's protagonist from the conservative state of international aggression they herald, an estimation of global politics that leaves no room for the individual.

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Notes

- 1 *Rambo: First Blood Part II* grossed over one hundred fifty million dollars at the domestic box office; worldwide, the film, during its initial run, approached earnings in excess of three hundred million dollars. By comparison, *Red Dawn* and *Missing in Action* grossed nearly forty million dollars and twenty-three million dollars, respectively.
- 2 Gregory A. Waller, "Rambo: Getting to Win This Time", in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, eds. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 119-20.
- 3 Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser, "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: Rambo's Rewriting of the Vietnam War", in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, eds. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 105. Studlar and Desser write that "Rambo was not only the most commercially successful of all the Vietnam films thus far but also became culturally ubiquitous".
- 4 Vincent Canby, "Vietnam Revisited", *The New York Times*, 22 May 1985, accessed 30 July 2007, www.movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?_r=1&res=9E00ESD9133BF931A15756C0A963948260&oref=slogin.
- 5 Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, genre and the action cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 92-3.
- 6 Though director George P. Cosmatos initially intended to shoot *Rambo: First Blood Part II* in Thailand, production constraints led to the film being shot entirely in Mexico, specifically in the cities of Acapulco and Tecomanapa, which stand in for the United States, Thailand, and Vietnam. Cosmatos is interviewed in the 2002 documentary short *We Get to Win This Time*, produced and directed by Ian T. Haufrect, 20 min., Automat Pictures and Artisan Home Entertainment, Inc. available on *Rambo: First Blood Part II's* Blu Ray release.
- 7 Waller, 115.
- 8 Mette Hjort, "Themes of Nation", *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), 108-9 and Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications, 1995).
- 9 Waller, 114.
- 10 Philippa Gates, "'Fighting the Good Fight': The Real and the Moral in the Contemporary Hollywood Combat Film", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 22:4 (2005), 304.
- 11 It is important to note that one of the prisoners of war is African-American. However, of the more than fifty individual shots that picture the prisoners of war as a group, he appears in only seventeen, and then only in the background, occluded by an obstacle in the mise-en-scène, or in shadow. Indeed, the African-American prisoner of war is effectively edited out of the film, his presence apparent only through close analysis. Viewed at its regular speed, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* successfully renders any racial difference among the POWs invisible.
- 12 Waller, 122-3.
- 13 Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, genre and the action cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 93-7.
- 14 Tasker, 119. In the documentary *We Get to Win This Time* Julia Nickson discusses her co-star's workout schedule, noting that Stallone "works out every day without fail, and every evening, and I have to say it's probably one of the few movies I've done where the guy looks better than the girl".
- 15 Tasker, 122-3.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 17 Yvonne Tasker, Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser, and Gregory A. Waller discuss Rambo as the 'Noble Savage,' a primitive who uses his innate skills to both redeem himself and fight for the oppressed. See Tasker, 125, Studlar and Desser, 108-9 and Waller, 119.



Critical Choices

POINTS OF VIEW IN AND ON *THE THIN RED LINE*

by JEREMY MILLINGTON

The Thin Red Line (1998) marked a return to filmmaking twenty years after Terrence Malick's previous release, *Days of Heaven* (1978), and thirty-five years removed from his debut film, *Badlands* (1973). *The Thin Red Line* signaled a shift to a new genre for Malick and his first away from the broad landscapes of rural, middle-Western America. In the period between his first two films and his third, a substantial body of critical literature blossomed, giving rise to certain expectations for this new project. Though *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* displayed relatively concise narrative subjects, each garnered attention for their dense mythic underpinnings. Given these existing thematic proclivities, a film set during World War II didn't necessarily signal a significant departure for Malick. The majority of critical responses tentatively agree on the genre label for *The Thin Red Line*—this is a war film—as long as one understands 'war' from a variety of angles.

The film is based on James Jones' 1963 novel of the same name, and Malick's treatment comes after an earlier film version released in 1964. Some have argued, rightly I believe, that *The Thin Red Line* fits best in the category of post-Vietnam American film making, akin to *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978), generally considered 'anti-war' films; compared with, say, the orthodoxy of the Good War mystique surrounding most popular World War II projects, cinematic or otherwise.¹ Additionally, Malick's personal history with philosophy, especially the work of Martin Heidegger, has become a rather popular interpretative lens during his absence from and return to filmmaking. He studied with Stanley Cavell at Harvard and as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, though he never completed his doctoral work. A number of readings explore the film as a manifestation of Heideggerian themes on Being and

mortality.² These are thematic readings, as none of Malick's films make any explicit, diegetic references to Heidegger or philosophy. Some writers ally the film with themes of transcendence and nature,³ while others focus narrowly on its visual and aural patterns.⁴ More conventional narrative analyses are in abundance as well, discussing the film in terms of its representation of a particular historical event (i.e. the battle of Guadalcanal).⁵ Each of these contextualizing postures—thematic hallmarks, genre placement, historical record, and Malick biography—provide the basis for the dominant trends in the analyses of *The Thin Red Line*.

One of the intriguing aspects of the film is better represented in the criticism than in a simple recounting of the plot (or even a casual viewing). It's a quality that arises through a careful survey of the sundry articles, essays, chapters and books on the film. These analyses don't serve merely to illuminate some picture of the film, though they certainly accomplish that in the outstanding cases; they also mirror a perplexing quality imbedded in the *mise-en-scène*. This is perhaps most evident in terms of one notorious filmic device: the voiceover. In broader terms, the issue of voiceover in Malick connects to point of view, which is vitally important in *The Thin Red Line*, though also in the war film genre as a whole. It is particularly central in terms of a fundamental ambiguity common to many of film history's exemplary cases.⁶

The Thin Red Line is such an exemplary case, on all accounts. There are, on the one hand, points of view internal to the film, expressed through character and voiceover. That these are slippery and difficult to pin down is fairly uncontroversial. On the other hand, there is the more problematic issue of the film's point of view. There is a basic tension between the plurality and divergence of points of view in the film and Malick's elusive presentation of them, notably, through voiceover, which the literature on the film somewhat unwittingly embodies and reflects. Such confusion and subtlety presents a challenging interpretive obstacle, making it difficult to cohesively evaluate the extent of the film's dense, often conflicting thematic manifestations, be it Heideggerian, religious, political, historical or otherwise. A meta-narrative analysis of the voiceovers in the film will demonstrate the ways in which they exhibit a variety of thematic points of view while simultaneously inviting confusion as to their more general purpose. After this picture becomes clearer, some of the film's other devices, which operate on a similarly ambiguous plane, will come together to illustrate Malick's tenuous relationship with genre conventions and style.

Voices and Voiceovers

There is a curious and telling fact about the critical responses to *The Thin Red Line* and its voiceovers. Take, for example, this passage from *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, discussing the film's final moments:

The voice we hear is that of Witt, who has been killed. It is as if he were speaking for all the other men, and also as if his being able to do so didn't depend on his being alive ... These complex final moments encapsulate the work of the entire film.⁷

If these moments do in fact encapsulate the entire film, and the Witt voiceover is crucial to that account, then Bersani and

Dutoit have a potentially serious problem. The voice is not Witt's, played by Jim Caviezel. There are a couple ways one can go about explaining this. The DVD subtitles provide the first clue, which attribute the voiceover to Train (John Dee Smith), another soldier. However, the subtitles lack consistency, crediting near identical sounding voiceovers to different characters at different points. Another proof requires a less scientific strategy, admittedly, but worth considering: listen closely to both characters, ignoring what comes on screen, and it seems fairly clear the voice comes from Train, not Witt. Various editions of the screenplay give no indication as to who might be speaking in those dying moments, which leaves the question open. Anecdotal evidence indicates that Malick recorded most of the voiceovers in post production,⁸ somewhat unbeknownst to many of the film's cast and crew.⁹ Looking through the relatively extensive academic essays written on the film, as well as any number of popular critical responses, it seems that Bersani and Dutoit are not alone on this issue. Here runs a short-list of the conflicting and questionable attributions found in the literature on Malick's film:

They walk through the trees, Witt's inner voice invoking nature: 'Who are you, to live in all that many forms?'¹⁰

As Charlie company leave Guadalcanal and are taken back to their ship on a landing craft, we hear the final voiceover from Witt, this time from beyond the grave: "Oh my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes, look out at the things you made, all things shining."¹¹

It seems clear[...] that at least the majority of them [the voiceovers] are attributable to Witt.¹²

"Does our ruin benefit the earth, aid the grass to grow, and the sun to shine? Is this darkness in you too? Have you passed through this night?" asks Witt after the taking of Hill 210.¹³

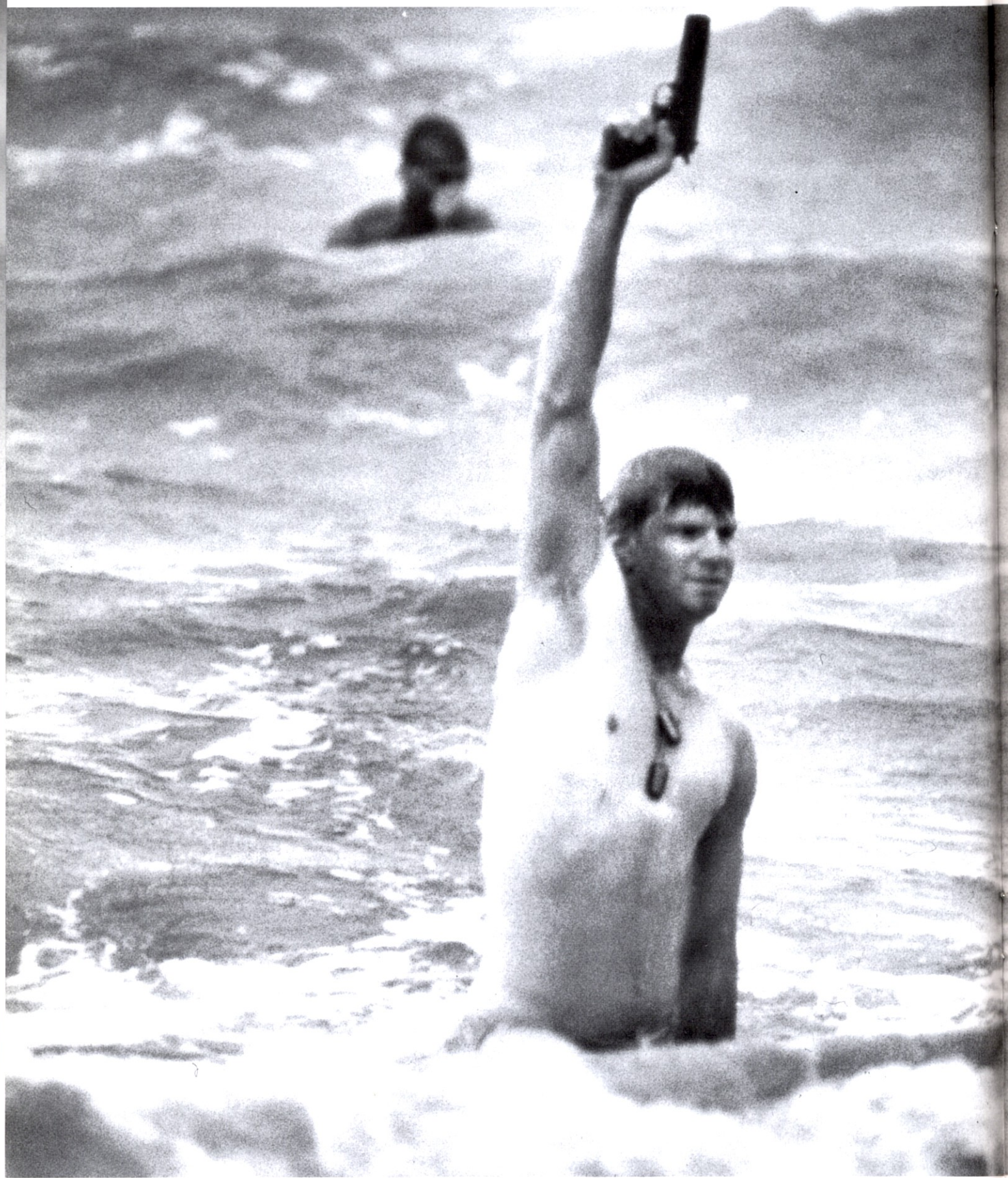
As the camera follows Welsh looking after his men in the lush green twilight, a voiceover—not Welsh's but Witt's—comments on the subjectivity of all human vision: "One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain. Another man sees that same bird and feels the glory."¹⁴

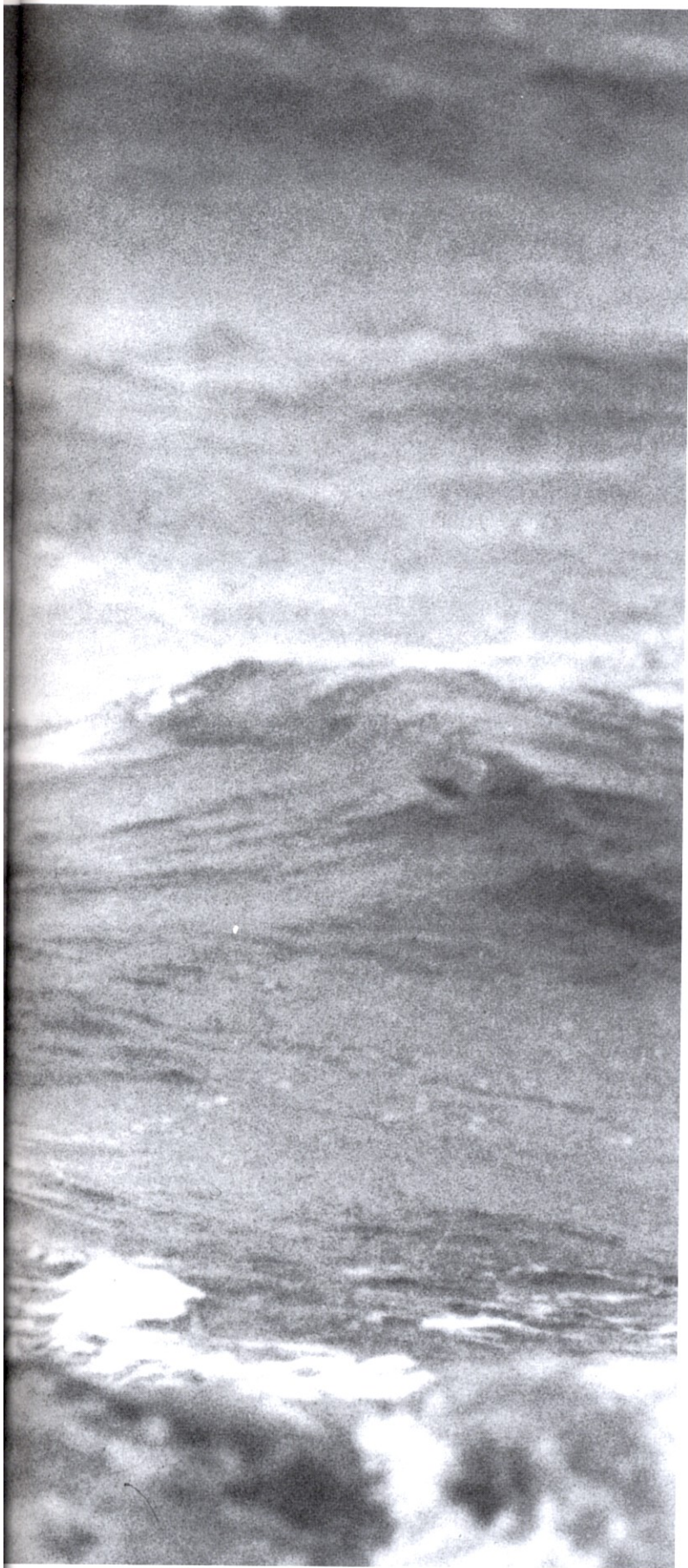
"What is this war in nature?" is the first sentence we hear, murmured earnestly by the AWOL soldier Witt at the start of the film.¹⁵

'What's this war in the heart of nature?' asks Private Witt in the first narration of *The Thin Red Line*.¹⁶

We hear his [Witt's] voice-over a few minute later, and he has become the transparent eyeball: "O My Soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining."¹⁷

"This great evil, where did it come from?" Wit [sic] asks.¹⁸





Welsh's assertions are confounded by Witt's questions: 'What is this war in the heart of nature?' 'Where does this evil come from?'¹⁹

At the beginning of the film, Witt in voice-over asks, 'What's this war at the heart of nature?'²⁰

Looking through these references and others, one point of consensus seems to arise: many of the voiceovers belong to the same character, whoever that may be, although, like many aspects of the film, there are exceptions to this rule. Some analyses build their entire reading of the film around the assumption that certain voiceovers belong to Witt. A few writers acknowledge the difficulty of correctly attributing the voiceovers then make loose conclusions, or fail to question why the link between speech and speaker is so difficult to identify.

David Davies comes close to evaluating this aspect of the film. The quote from Davies listed above comes at the end of a section in which he discusses the ambiguity, "Some voiceovers are difficult to attribute because the cues that serve us well in other cases lead here to conflicting attributions."²¹ It is not clear whether Davies means the cues from other films or cues from other parts of *The Thin Red Line*. He goes on to give an example in which a voiceover seems to belong to Witt "given its content" yet plays over shots of Welsh (Sean Penn), Witt's superior.²² The qualification 'given its content' suggests he believes previous voiceovers belong to Witt, that previous instances were obvious, that one can safely guess what sort of things Witt would say at this stage. Needless to say, I'm skeptical such clarity is evident at this stage, or possibly any.

In a book dedicated to Malick and his films, Lloyd Michaels makes even more curious claims. At one point he ascribes a Train voiceover to Private Bell (Ben Chaplin) almost solely based on the convention that voiceovers belong to the character most prevalent on screen, a convention Michaels admits Malick frequently disregards.²³ Remarkably, this same voiceover others attribute to Witt.²⁴ In another instance, Michaels determines "after several viewings" that the final voiceover belongs to Witt.²⁵ He never provides any contextual explanation, that is, why it makes sense in terms of the film as a whole.

Looking at the first five minutes of the film closely, one might start to wonder how such widespread confusion came about. There are two voiceovers in that span, which constitute the only clear speech. Given the proximity of these moments, it ought to be somewhat clear whether or not each voiceover came from the same person. The first voiceover plays invisibly over footage of trees and plants, a voice pondering 'this war in the heart of nature' and similar, philosophic sounding ideas. The delivery of these first lines is clear and at the center of the film's focus, leaving a firm impression of the voice not just in terms of content, but in terms of rhythm and intonation and so





The Thin Red Line: Nick Nolte (as Tall) tells the men of C-for-Charlie Company their objective.

forth. The next clearly audible speech also begins in voiceover, but, just a few seconds later, Malick reveals a character delivering the speech—Witt. Ignoring the fact that the subtitles, even at this early stage, identify Train as the first speaker, any suspicion of difference between the first speaker and the second should demand an admission of uncertainty, a sign to pay close attention to this ambiguous system of reference. Yet, across a sizeable body of critics coming from multiple backgrounds and with varying agendas, none suggest that Train might be the speaker of these opening lines and few investigate the ambiguity as an integrated device of the film's content. The question then, is whether these writers have failed to look at the film with sufficient

attention or if the film intentionally invites such confusion.

Numerous writers insist that the film defies genre norms and classical narrative structure²⁶—a good indication not to trust its apparent conventions regarding voiceover—but still go on to analyze the film with the same critical posture. Many of these same writers refer to Malick's previous two films and their unconventional use of voiceover; voiceovers that, on first glance, have the sound and feel of traditional voiceover but perform an alternative function when viewed in the context of the film as a whole.²⁷ Despite some clear differences between the voiceovers in Malick's first films and his third—the voices come from multiple characters, primarily men instead of women—there still seems to be a fundamental similarity in their lack of plot-narrative function.

Ultimately, I do not wish to discuss the voiceovers in the film strictly in terms of their isolated content, or even voiceover in general terms. However, there is something emblematic and illuminating that comes out of pairing the critical responses with similarly constructed devices in the film. Indeed, the plenitude of misattributions inadvertently brings to light one of the more fundamental qualities of the film: the ambiguity, plurality, and equality of points of view, narratively, thematically, and critically. It is not a coincidence that across such a wide body of literature on *The Thin Red Line*, only a couple of sources definitively object to the 'Witt voiceovers'. Amy Copland's essay, *Form and Feeling*, provides one such contention. She includes the following footnote with regard to the film's first voiceover: "The voice is not actually Jim Caviezel's (Sandhya Shardanand, assistant to Terrence Malick, private communication)."²⁸ Her footnote comes with the conclusion that "the filmmakers intended viewers to attribute the voiceover to Witt."²⁹ This claim stands

by itself, however, buried in footnotes without any substantial critical links to the rest of her analysis. Equally important, however, if this voice from the opening monologue is the same voice so many ally with Witt in the rest of the film, and that voice is not Jim Caviezel's, then none of the other voiceovers necessarily belong to Witt, either.

Missing from the opening list of misattributed voiceovers is a different kind of misattribution, this time a misattribution of character. In his summary of the film, Michel Chion refers to an earlier section of his own essay, stating, "Gaff talks about his youth, his experience of the worst."³⁰ The character that actually states these lines is Private Train (Smith), not Gaff, played by John Cusack, a popular and generally recognizable actor. Besides the fact that Gaff is not present at the end of the film, and the fact that Cusack and Smith bear little resemblance to one another, consider Chion's summary of the film as a whole. Chion never mentions Train in his entire book, or Gaff apart from this singular instance, even though both occupy relatively similar narrative space (more than many of the film's so-called 'stars', in fact). This speaks not only to the narrowness of Chion's analysis, centering primarily on just two characters (Witt and Welsh) in a film notoriously slippery in its focus on any one individual, but to a larger and more worrying trend.

In a review of Chion's book, Ian-Malcolm Rijsdijk points out the Gaff-Train confusion, while also raising a lone voice of concern over the attribution of the film's final voiceover:

It is a critical commonplace (which Chion follows) that the final voiceover in the film is spoken entirely by Witt. However this has always troubled me as much aurally as interpretatively: why do viewers automatically assume it is Witt, and what in the film supports such an assumption?³¹

Rijsdijk starts to discuss Train and how he fits into this scene, but then takes an equally bizarre turn by dividing the final voiceover between Witt and a third character, Doll. Though he concedes to the ambiguity of the voiceovers—"The possibility that Doll's voice is present in the final voiceover is only that, a possibility"—Rijsdijk never fully addresses the issue as a reflection of the film's content; instead, he points out another questionable voiceover ascription from Chion and moves on.³²

Train occupies a much more central role than most critics, not just Chion and Rijsdijk, seem to have noticed. Not only do most analyses fail to identify Train as the source of various key voiceovers, but they fail to mention him at all, Rijsdijk notwithstanding. With shorter reviews of the film, like those found in newspapers and periodicals, it seems somewhat understandable that an unfamiliar, second tier cast member could go without recognition. In Anthony Lane's review of the film originally published in *The New Yorker*, he mentions most of the principle cast, but also a list of actors (not necessarily their characters, incidentally) with fewer lines and screen time than Train: John C. Reilly, George Clooney, and John Travolta; even Elias Koteas' Captain Staros, arguably the character with the most lines and narrative focus of any character in the film, receives no mention at all. Longer analyses of the film fall victim to the same compartmentalized critical gesturing.³³ Bersani and Dutoit's rather substantial chapter on Malick's film never mentions Train, either, and, similarly, still manages to make note of Clooney and Travolta. The curious fact here is not the lack of attention on

Train, or the excessive focus on Witt, or even the casual mentioning of Hollywood heavyweights delivering just enough lines to warrant space on the promotional material; rather, the issue is that so many of these analyses build the core of their interpretations around a particular image of Witt, an image largely conceived on the assumption that certain voiceovers are Witt's.

How has Train been so universally ignored? In some ways, his role possesses a purposely invisible quality, like that of a Gospel witness, which partially explains why so many miss his impact on the film, the focus being drawn to that which he attests: namely, Witt. That Witt represents a sort of Christ figure is evident in a number of details: the sacrificial, ritualized nature of his death, his insistence on the reality of 'another world', and his primacy in catalyzing the plot. Train's invisibility also suggests a device common to the genre: the faceless and unremarkable conflation of human individuals in the chaos of war, occasionally at the expense of arbitrary and unwarranted hero worship (think, the critical focus on the visible, major stars/characters over lesser ones).

The confusion over voiceovers rarely surfaces in analyses of the film as an intentional strategy. My basic argument is that the voice-overs technically belong to Train, though such a reading need not necessarily be the case. That is, the tacit assumption that Witt delivers the bulk of the voiceovers is a poor one, and it would have to be demonstrated more rigorously. In a similar sense, the variety of thematic readings of the film do not necessarily stand in mutual exclusion, though they do when taken at face value. The broader point to be drawn is that the film encourages dramatically different readings with relative ease without ever fully endorsing one, presenting a range of ideas within the narrative, as well as in its broad and often conflicting allusions. Davies discusses this tension, picking up on the "astonishing diversity of readings,"³⁴ but he uses this primarily as a starting point for his own, bounded analysis rather than one exploring the reasons for such diversity as principally significant. On its own, falsely attributing voiceovers is a minor incident. To substantiate the charge of misattributed voiceovers and their subservience to a more elusive strategy, other elements of the film would need to show similar complexities, embracing points of view while undermining them.

Genre Conventions

One way in which the film creates confusion is its simultaneous denial and embrace of genre conventions. Some analyses hail *The Thin Red Line's* unparalleled realism in presenting the horrors of war, while others heavily criticize its narrative meandering and pseudo-philosophic musings. There are just enough elements of convention to bait those looking for something of the historical or 'objective', but its subtle subversiveness can also frustrate those same critics. On the flip side, those critics looking at the film purely in terms of its philosophic and Heideggerian illustrations seem to lack cohesiveness in their evaluation of the film, having denied or ignored some of the most basic facts about it. In the context of his own Heideggerian reading, Robert Sinnerbrink summarizes a potential drawback of this approach actualized in a similarly aimed essay, "What recedes from view in this reading is *the film as a film*, the detail of its narrative structure, the significance of its characters and their situation, the complexity of its sound and imagery."³⁵

In that first category of historical readings, there are reviews like Tom Whalen's, another perpetrator of misattributed

voiceover: "What keeps us from reaching out and touching the glory?" wonders Witt. Well, in the narrative context the answer might be that we'd get a finger shot off."³⁶ Whalen generally bemoans the film's ponderous tone and fixation on nature as a betrayal of the realities of the war. Nicholas Cull approaches the film from a similar, historically minded perspective, but arrives at opposite conclusions: "Death and life, honor and ignominy are apportioned at random, with no regard to a character's moral worth or military prowess. Malick's vision offers a realism more profound than the pyrotechnics of Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*"³⁷—more on that film shortly.

The film does portray one major action sequence with gritty realism, tragedy, and loss—those established genre trademarks. However, this key battle scene finishes half-way through the film's nearly three hour run time, dispelling its climactic power. Martin Flanagan analyzes this battle scene, describing a few ways in which Malick acknowledges the conventions of a war film action sequence while subverting them at the same time:

It could be argued that this is the peak of the movie's appeal to formal and generic convention. Yet, the sequence does not make for comfortable or obvious viewing. Audience identification is complicated by the fact that the assault is led by John Cusack's Captain Gaff, a recognizable star but a character who seems to appear from nowhere to take us through the highlight of the movie. Malick, contrary as ever, seems to want to simultaneously disavow and celebrate the presence of star names throughout (...) Furthermore, the withholding of a master shot of the objective means that the spatial relationships of the scene are never fully clarified for the audience, a strategy that mirrors Malick's more general refusal to map out the territory of his narrative according to the codes of the war movie. However, more traditional techniques like slow motion, point of view shots and rapid cutting do gradually come to feature in the scene, establishing a degree of formal affinity with the war film.³⁸

Flanagan rather perceptively points out exactly the predicament in which Malick places a critic. There are two sides to every coin and neither necessarily trumps the other. For every identifiable star, there is a non-star; or, for every star, there is an untimely death (Woody Harrelson), negligible screen time (Travolta), or a bizarrely timed entrance and exit (Cusack, Clooney). Michaels makes similar observations about genre conventions in relating the film to its World War II twin released the same year, Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998):

With its avoidance of the established generic tropes of the war film, multiple voiceovers, elliptical editing, metaphysical musings, and prolonged denouement, Malick's film seemed opaque compared to Spielberg's classical narrative and patriotic appeal to cultural memory.³⁹

Flanagan and Michaels both demonstrate ways in which Malick strays from genre norms, but never so far as to completely dismiss them, at least providing enough plot and simple narrative coherency to keep the film grounded in basic events.

The music in the film also runs across a spectrum of classifi-

Saving Private Ryan



cations. On the one hand, the Melanesians that help open the film sing simple hymns with no musical accompaniment. The score, on the other hand, utilizes a variety of modern and classical techniques, often registering only a low, hypnotic tone that sounds both organic and industrial. Morrison and Schur analyze two of the more obscure musical sources in Malick's films, including a cult recording used in *The Thin Red Line*:

"Cosmic Beam Experience" is an album that features four long compositions and one short one, all relatively indistinguishable in a wash of orchestral proto-New Age music, with titles like "Heal Yourself" and "Love Sweet Love." The specter of transcendental meditation, it is not too much to suggest, hovers over both Syntonic Research and the Cosmic Beam Experience. What they signify in Malick's work is that quality of inclusiveness that returns to a central theme.⁴⁰

Somewhere in between the Melanesian hymns and the 'proto-New Age' music lies pieces of borrowed or quoted classical compositions, like Gabriel Faure's *Requiem*. Chion and Davies both discuss the implementation of Charles Ives' *The Unanswered Question* into the score, as well.⁴¹ Finally, at the film's close, as the credits roll, Malick reintroduces the

Melanesian choir but supplements the singing with the Hans Zimmer score, blending the film's most simple musical form with its most complex.

The presentation of nature in the film also embraces multiple points of view, another fact reflected in the literature. Malick presents resplendent images of nature in each of his films, but the effect has never been more divisive than with *The Thin Red Line*. Chion argues that the images of nature in *The Thin Red Line* are not presented symbolically or as counterpoint, "Malick does not contrast a good, peaceful nature with human beings who sully and profane it with their murders."⁴² For Chion, Malick foregrounds nature and integrates it into the same narrative space as the human action. This angle seems at odds with the view taken by Ron Mottram, "Malick's use of nature and natural beauty rises to the level of a powerful sign for a higher good."⁴³ Where Chion resists reading nature symbolically or ideally, Mottram links Malick's film to Thoreau's "transcendental vision of nature as a link to a deeper reality."⁴⁴ The merits of both arguments aside, it seems surprising that such divergent analyses belong to the same film, and these are just two of the numerous critical angles taken up.

This tensional relationship to genre standards, music, and nature functions on a largely interpretive level, but Malick also consistently plays the same paradoxical game with specific





The Thin Red Line: Nick Nolte as Commander Tall.

moments within the diegesis. He mixes the high with the low, the ordinary with the extraordinary, the regular with the irregular. Aboard the military ship early in the film, as soldiers variously express their fears and skepticism in the sloppy grammar of lower class America, Malick cuts to a soldier playing the violin. The film's score plays uninterrupted over this shot, muting whatever music might be coming from the violin and providing continuity with the next image of a soldier shaving down a piece of wood, carving a makeshift knife. The second shot begins as a medium close-up, obscuring the piece of wood and the knife used to shape its blade. The gesture of the carving, the movement of the arms and the focus of the eyes, lends both activities a similar rhythmic quality. The violinist's bow is the soldier's knife, and the violin the sculpted piece of wood. By delaying the reveal, Malick elevates each act onto a similar plane,

blurring the line between the sophistication of a classical instrument with the brutal reality of a combat weapon.

This sort of repetition and variation occurs throughout the film with objects, imagery, and sounds, placing objects in relation to one another in such a way as to strip them of singular values and meaning. The crocodile from the opening shot, for instance, also slips into the film later on. Casting doubt on its initial suggestiveness, Michaels comments, "Even the status of the crocodile as a significant symbol is deliberately called into question when, away from the line, the victorious GIs celebrate the capture of a far less threatening crocodile displayed on the back of an army truck."⁴⁵ In a more sweeping gesture, Kenneth Turan succinctly illustrates the level of ambiguity Malick elicits, "From its unnerving opening look at a crocodile floating half above and half below a surface of green slime, 'Thin Red Line' has a tendency toward shots that might be metaphorical but then again might not."⁴⁶

With regard to character types, Malick again embraces outwardly conflicting points of view. Although many characters never receive enough screen time to display a great deal of depth or development, they do convey some rather provocative complexities. Nick Nolte's Lt. Col. Tall appears to be a stock man-in-charge, hell-bent on victory. However, Tall delivers moments of reflection rare for a man of his type. On the morning of a key battle, Tall reminisces about his days at the Point when he read Homer (in Greek), quoting a line about the 'rosy-fingered dawn' (in Greek) while admiring the morning twilight.

Tall's counterpoint in the film, Captain Staros, refuses to blindly throw his men into the line of fire and effectively ensure their deaths. His character is very much a moral and intellectual center of the film; he is educated, compassionate, and principled. Yet, his character also falls to his knees in prayer, searching for guidance through faith in some incorporeal presence. His faith could easily come across as superstitious, or as Kaja Silverman derisively describes it, a call to an extraterrestrial void.⁴⁷ As an unexpected facet of a character carrying so much moral weight, however, more flattering interpretations are just as viable.

In each of these elements, genre convention, imagery, music, and character, Malick adds a subtle ambiguity that invites confusion and, more importantly, contemplation. Indeed, the film begs a lot of questions, literally and figuratively. The final five minutes embody this point as well as any sequence. A final voiceover begins immediately after Train finishes speaking and over a shot void of focus on a particular character:

Where is it that we were together? Who were you that I lived with, walked with? The brother. The friend. Darkness, light. Strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh, my soul. Let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining.

During the reading of this final monologue, only two previously identified characters appear, Private Doll (Dash Mihok) and Sergeant Welsh, with Doll receiving the most screen time. He looks out at the sea from the ship's stern, though not obviously in the same direction as the following shot. As the voiceover shifts to more abstract proclamations—"Oh, my soul, let me be in you now"—the view shifts to a direct shot overlooking the water, only ocean, land, and the ship's wake visible. Surprisingly, only one writer attributes this voiceover to Doll, and even then, it's split between Witt and Doll.⁴⁸ Though the words convey something buoyantly reverent taken out of context, the music has the same mysterious, severe tone from the opening shot. The content of the voiceover gradually becomes more and more perplexing, just as the deliverer of the voiceover becomes less and less attributable to anything on screen. Who is this speaker? Who is he addressing? Talking about these same lines, Bersani and Dutoit conclude, "There can be no answers to these questions."⁴⁹ They effectively extrapolate this conclusion to all of the questions asked in the film. Each character seems to represent one way of answering these questions, whether through Witt's pseudo-Christian transcendentalism or Welsh's pessimistic realism. Perhaps more accurately, and more fundamentally, Michaels observes, "Although the film raises questions and examines points of view, it does not attempt to provide definitive answers."⁵⁰ Just actions require definitive explanations, a definitive point of view. As a war film, this has a particular effect, as if all conflict arises out of an unnecessarily hasty drive toward rigorously fixed points of view. Malick consistently encapsulates and includes things together—lightness and dark, the high and the low, the real and the surreal, the historical and the mythic—which partially dispels an obvious moral code in the film.

Significantly, the film does not end on the shot overlooking the ocean, its corresponding monologue, and dreary musical tone. All fade out. Malick shows three subsequent shots: three

Melanesians paddling down a river, two birds of paradise, and a solitary plant sprouting from a round, unidentifiable object sitting along the watery banks of a beach. The only dominant sounds are that of wind and moving water. The final word is not given to any one character, but to the world itself in all its variance, in its remission. This puts some emphasis on the inability of speech to provide concise conclusions, allowing the sounds and images of the natural world and its Edenic form to take over—a possible return to paradise but an ultimately inconclusive one.

Referencing an article by Bill Schaffer, Robert Silberman comments that point of view is everything in war and, accordingly, in war films⁵¹. Silberman further notes that Malick's film and its closing moments "provide an unmediated, nonverbal argument for the radiant splendor of the world and the victory of a faith in spirit, although that does not necessarily answer the fundamental questions that haunt the film."⁵² Here again, a writer epitomizes the difficulty of proclaiming anything too definitively, recognizing the mystifying ambiguity of the film while still trying to pin down something fixed and sure.

Yvette Biro picks up on a thread from Gilles Deleuze that beautifully mirrors this relationship between the literature on *The Thin Red Line* and a specific quality in it:

Deleuze analyzes how perception relies on elliptical, drifting, and fundamentally weak relationships that transform the narrative, and he concludes that intensity lies in the gaze of the protagonists. They, and through them the viewers, invest objects with meaning, emotional content, and the need to understand the world opening before them.⁵³

Malick's film provides multiple characters and objects of attention, drifting in and out of the narrative without a singular focus, an elliptical rhythmic patterning. He frequently deploys medium close-ups of his characters, sitting on a spectrum of gazes offered by those massed together in war, then closes his film without any speech, and without any gaze. There is a need to understand the world opening before us, and Malick provides a plethora of gazes to choose from, and a correspondingly disparate range of voiceovers, then, in its closing shots, none—only a world projected on screen, all things shining. The only sure things are invisible to us, hidden beneath a murky cloak of human action and speech.

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Notes

- 1 John Streamas, "The Greatest Generation Steps Over *The Thin Red Line*," in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America (Directors' Cuts)*, ed. Hannah Patterson (New York: Wallflower Press, 2004): 137-147.
- 2 See Robert Clewis, "Heideggerian Wonder in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," *Film and Philosophy* 7 (2003): 22-36; Simon Critchley, "Calm—On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," in *The Thin Red Line (Philosophers on Film)*, ed. David Davies (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009): 11-27; Hubert Dreyfus and Camilo Salazar Prince, "The Thin Red Line: Dying Without Demise, Demise Without Dying," in Davies., 29-43; Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy, "Terrence Malick's Heideggerian Cinema: War and the Question of Being in *The Thin Red Line*," in Patterson, 173-185; Kaja Silverman, "All Things Shining," in *Loss: the Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California P, 2003): 323-42; Robert Sinnerbrink, "A Heideggerian Cinema?: On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," *Film-Philosophy* 10 (2006): 26-37.
- 3 See Michel Chion, *The Thin Red Line (Bfi Modern Classics)* (Annapolis: British Film Institute, 2004); Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick (Contemporary Film Directors)* (Urbana: University of Illinois P, 2009); Ron Mottram, "All Things Shining: The Struggle for Wholeness, Redemption and Transcendence in the Films of Terrence Malick," in Patterson, 13-23; Stacey Peebles-Power, "The Other World of War: Terrence Malick's Adaptation of *The Thin Red Line*," in Patterson, 148-159.
- 4 See Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (Annapolis: British Film Institute, 2004); Amy Copland, "Form and Feeling in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," in Davies, 65-86; David Davies, "Vision, Touch, and Embodiment in *The Thin Red Line*," in Davies, 45-64; James Wierzbicki, "Sound as Music in the Films of Terrence Malick," in Patterson, 110-122.
- 5 See Martin Flanagan, "'Everything a Lie': The Critical and Commercial Reception of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," in Patterson, 123-136; Streamas, 137-147; Tom Whalen, "'Maybe all men got one big soul': Hoax Within the Metaphysics of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," *Literature-Film Quarterly* 27 (1999): 162-66.
- 6 See George Wilson, *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View* (New York: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1988).
- 7 Bersani and Dutoit, 135.
- 8 Davies, 58.
- 9 James Morrison and Thomas Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (New York: Praeger, 2003): 85.
- 10 Chion, 76.
- 11 Critchley, 26.
- 12 Davis, 59.
- 13 Dreyfus and Prince, 40.
- 14 Michaels, 76.
- 15 Morrison and Schur, 26.
- 16 Mottram, 15.
- 17 Peebles-Power, 154.
- 18 Silverman, 33.
- 19 Sinnerbrink, 32.
- 20 Streamas, 139.
- 21 Davies, 58.
- 22 Davies, 58.
- 23 Michaels, 69.
- 24 See Chion, 76.
- 25 Michaels, 73.
- 26 See Copland, 70; Michaels, 63-65; Flanagan, 130-135.
- 27 See Chion 53-54; Morrison and Schur 34-38.
- 28 Copland, 85.
- 29 Ibid., 85.
- 30 Chion, 86.
- 31 Ian-Malcolm Rijsdijk, "Apprehending Beauty: Michel Chion on Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," *Film-Philosophy* 10 (2006): 50.
- 32 Ibid., 51-52.
- 33 Anthony Lane, *Nobody's Perfect: Writings from the New Yorker* (Great Britain: Picador, 2002): 269.
- 34 Davies, 46.
- 35 Sinnerbrink, 30.
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- 37 Nicholas J. Cull, "Review: [untitled]," *The American Historical Review* 104 (1999): 1050.
- 38 Flanagan, 132.
- 39 Michaels, 18.
- 40 Morrison and Schur, 83.
- 41 Chion, 9-14; Davies, 49.
- 42 Chion, 41.
- 43 Mottram, 15.
- 44 Ibid., 15.
- 45 Michaels, 76.
- 46 Kenneth Turan, "'Red Line': A Distant Epic," *LA Times Calendar Live*, <http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-movie981223-3,0,5219708.story>.
- 47 Silverman, 329.
- 48 Rijsdijk 51.
- 49 Bersani and Dutoit, 170.
- 50 Michaels, 23.
- 51 Silberman, 166.
- 52 Ibid., 170.
- 53 Yvette Biro, *Turbulence and Flow in Film: The Rhythmic Design*, trans. Paul Salamon (New York: Indiana UP, 2009).

Representing the Human Condition in the Great War

WILLIAM BOYD'S *THE NEW CONFESSIONS* AND *THE TRENCH*

by JANE MATTISSON

This article discusses the representation of the human condition in two autobiographical works about World War One, one a printed text and the other a film. I compare the contrasting depictions of life on the western front as presented in William Boyd's *The New Confessions*¹ and his documentary film *The Trench*.² Boyd's novel is an autobiography of a film director, James Todd, whose film-making career begins in World War One and continues in Hollywood after the war. I discuss why the representations in the two different media, creations of the same writer, and directed for the same purpose—to tell 'the truth'—present very different versions of the fighting soldier's life in the trenches. At the same time, an analysis of the directors' methods demonstrates that Boyd's novel and his film are based on a common principle: life is both paradoxical and uncertain. War has a special power to demonstrate the truth of this conviction.

The New Confessions is both a biography and an autobiography: John James Todd writes his own story at the same time as he recreates for the cinema that of his namesake, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, author of *The Confessions* (1782).³ *The New Confessions* may also be seen as a biography of the film industry, describing developments between World War One and post-Second-World-War Hollywood. The medium in the novel which brings together biography and autobiography is film. The fictional John James Todd has directed two films on the war: *Great British Regiments* and *The Aftermath of Battle*. While the former wins official approval, the latter is rejected by the censors. Both purport to tell the truth about life at the front. And both sink into oblivion almost as soon as they are completed.

The Trench is Boyd's sixth film, and the only one which is both written and directed by him. It was prompted by memories of his grandfather, who was wounded at the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917. The DVD version of *The Trench* contains short biographies of the main characters. The film has failed to win the critical acclaim that Boyd's earlier films and his novels have enjoyed. Both film directors believe they are telling the truth; in Todd's case, this is based on the evidence of first-hand experience, and in Boyd's, on conversations with his grandfather and research conducted at the Imperial War Museum. With *The New Confessions* and *The Trench*, Boyd has indeed 'done his time' in the trenches; it is 'his own time', and he has no intention of returning.

Autobiography, truth and imagination

The experience of the narrator or script-writer constitutes a uniquely qualified authority which has the ability to persuade readers or viewers of the veracity of his/her account. John James Todd is ostensibly the creator of *The New Confessions*. He describes the content and production of his films; we must rely on Todd's narrative accounts as we can neither see nor hear his productions. Todd's films, directed during the war, are silent: the only sound audible in the one viewing of *Great British Regiments* is accidental as it takes the form of genuine battle sounds heard from a distance.

The creator of *The Trench* describes in detail the background to and features of his film in his collection of non-fictional texts, *Bamboo*.⁴ Here he assures the reader that his account is reliable because it is based on thorough research. Todd's and Boyd's accounts contain significant differences: *The Trench* employs sound and consists primarily of dialogue; Todd's films are packed with action and destruction while Boyd's is static; and Todd's characters are anonymous while Boyd's main characters have a name, a personality, and a past.

Both the written and filmed versions are viewed here as textual, autobiographical constructions constituting complementary representations of truth. Autobiography is seen here as a performance that represents the character and intention of the agent responsible. The latter is the director of the performance and the one who controls its form. The autobiographical 'I' is not one but several 'selves', a fact which William Boyd himself acknowledges as he describes his life-long habit of keeping a journal: 'We keep a journal to entrap that collection of selves that forms us, the individual human being.'⁵ In other words, there is no unified, sovereign autobiographical subject.

The two films written and directed by Todd are made at different points in his film-making career and reflect an increasing understanding of the potential of film to demonstrate the truth about the nature of the human condition at war; at the same time, they suggest a change in attitude towards life itself as well as to the war. *The Trench* is prompted by a fascination with World War One begun in childhood. Boyd has also expressed a growing interest in script-writing and film direction as alternative artistic pursuits to writing literature.

All three cinematic representations, i.e. Todd's two films and Boyd's *The Trench*, are fiction as defined by their creator: they are shaped by hindsight (Todd starts his film career after completing several months' active service as a private soldier at the front; Boyd enjoys the benefit of a chronological distance of almost one century) as well as 'the manipulations of ego.'⁶ Their creators have two primary agendas: to tell the truth as they see it and know it, and to entertain. Their field of vision is limited, and their texts inevitably contain gaps.

Rousseau, the writer who haunts the fictional Todd, argues in *The Confessions* that to convey reality in writing it is necessary for the narrator to fill in gaps and to 'suppose true what he knows could have been true.'⁷ This requires imagination both on the part of the creator and the reader/viewer. How does one identify what one does not know or understand? How do gaps manifest themselves? What lies behind the subject? What has caused the present situation? What is about to happen? What is happening elsewhere, e.g. further down the trench or 'over the top', in *No Man's Land*? Can I trust the evidence put before me by the narrator of the text or the film director? What happens when chronology, which traditionally imposes order on

existence, ceases to be relevant, as is the case in all three films and at the end of the printed autobiography? The following discussion demonstrates that how we relate to these questions is largely determined by how we view the relationship between representation and the represented.

The nature and responsibility of representation

The special nature of representation as a bearer of truth becomes particularly clear when one compares photographic and textual reproductions. As Timothy Dow Adams argues, 'the interrelations between photography and autobiography demonstrate the inherent tendency in both to conceal as much as they reveal.'⁸ Pictures are fragments of a larger narrative which, when put together, create a story that provides an illusion of completeness and consensus.⁹ While the differences and similarities which appear when one compares pictures and texts are of little interest in themselves, the difference that the contrasts or similarities make is of profound importance in determining the potential of autobiographical texts to represent truth.¹⁰

Mitchell identifies two ways of thinking about the power of pictures: 'illusionism' and 'realism'. According to the illusionist tradition, pictures deceive, amaze, delight or in some way exercise power over the observer. Realism, on the other hand, relates to the capacity of a picture to represent the truth.¹¹ The difference between the two traditions—illusionist and realist—is that the former represents 'the way things look' while the latter purports to be 'the way things are'.

Mitchell argues that representation should be seen as an activity or process rather than an object, e.g. a statue or a film. What is represented in the present discussion, i.e. the truth about the human condition in time of war, is a participant in a process of representation, and not a product in its own right. In other words, what is represented is subject to the method and circumstances of reproduction, and the circumstances as well as the view and imagination of the director/writer. Todd's representation of truth, for example, is restricted both by his field of vision, i.e. he is part of what he is filming (Todd is a soldier), and by the technology of the day. He is also subject to the whims of the censors.

The representer must, Mitchell argues, accept responsibility both for the object of representation and the audience or recipient of the representation.¹² John James Todd and William Boyd take the responsibility that comes with representation, and both declare their desire to tell the truth. Both share a common conviction about the uncertainty of life, but their depiction of this truth is very different. The technology which they have at their disposal is also very different. In Todd's case, the representation process becomes as important as the represented as he becomes increasingly preoccupied with how he can make primitive equipment capture the speed and destruction of warfare, the most prominent feature of the war for Todd. For Boyd, on the other hand, the represented takes precedence over the representation process; the lack of action and movement in *The Trench* focuses attention on the soldiers themselves and their dialogues. The absence of movement emphasises the increasing anxiety as the soldiers wait to 'go over the top'. Both depictions of life at the front, i.e. speed and massive destruction vs. long periods of waiting in claustrophobic trenches, are 'true' to the vision of reality on the western front which their creators wish to depict.

Boyd's film challenges the conventional representations of

World War One in classical Hollywood cinema by resisting the temptation to reproduce rapid action, death and destruction in recurring cycles; instead, it represents another form of reality, one which was emphasised by his grandfather and which features regularly in soldiers' journals. It is not the differences between the representations that are important in themselves but the reasons for them and their effects on the reader/viewer.

Film-making and integrity

As Todd works on his films, his focus, as already observed, is increasingly on the process of representation itself, i.e. the technical aspects of filming. Visual effect dominates message as Todd focuses on events and aspects which appear to particularly good effect in film, even when this means ignoring other occurrences or features, and even—as in the Rousseau film—when it necessitates changing circumstances outlined in the text to suit the medium of representation. Can Todd be regarded as a responsible representer as defined by W.J.T. Mitchell? History demonstrates that Todd's films are based on a myth: fighting on the western front was not characterised by a constant succession of brutal clashes and massive destruction but by long periods of inactivity and mental anguish; battles were largely sporadic and local. Todd the soldier has a restricted field of vision. He is limited to a small part of the western front, where he has either served as a soldier or is permitted to visit as an official film-maker. Technically, Todd is also limited: he does not have access to sound; his messages must be transmitted by movement, facial expression etc. Colour was at the time of World War One restricted to one-colour tinting and toning, while the reality of war was multi-coloured. Even if his efforts to transcend the technical limitations of the time caused him to become preoccupied with method and effect, Todd's integrity as a film-maker is never in question: he consistently strives to tell the truth as he sees it, within his own physical limitations, and with the restricted technical means available.

The integrity of William Boyd in *The Trench*, produced eleven years after *The New Confessions*, is also confirmed by considering the circumstances of its director and the technical equipment available. With the benefit of hindsight, protracted research (including viewing considerable quantities of authentic World-War-One footage) and advanced technology, Boyd's vision is different to that of his fictional director, John James Todd, and must indeed be so. He is not restricted by being directly involved in the action, and the technology at his disposal is infinitely more sophisticated. Boyd wishes to correct the myth that Todd projects. Ironically, the very technology, i.e. cameras which can film fast movement, which is denied Todd and is available to Boyd, is deliberately ignored in *The Trench*. This is because it is not needed. Boyd's film deliberately restricts vision; the soldiers cannot see anything but the confines of the protective walls, and they know nothing about No Man's Land. It is not until the final minutes of the film that they leave the trench, only to march to their death. They take their knowledge with them; it is lost almost as soon as it is gained. What then is Boyd's view of World War One?

Boyd describes World War One as a unique and horrific event inscribed in our memories as a 'mythic tale of bygone times' which continues to shape our lives.¹³ What stimulated Boyd to produce a film on the war, however, was not the horror but 'the unknowingness, the unimaginability'¹⁴ of the conflict. The truth is, by Boyd's own admission, unknowable, and

yet he professes to tell it, or at least a fraction of it, through his fictional persona. The reality presented in the three films is provisional, a set of random events. This is why John James Todd is forced to acknowledge in the final chapter of *The New Confessions* that the universal law is not Providence but the Uncertainty Principle. The element of chance convinces Todd that he is, finally, in tune with the universe. This is what World War One is all about for Todd and his creator. War has, as already observed, a special ability to illustrate this important truth. There is no need to produce a series of connected, meaningful incidents. To do so would indeed project a misleading picture of reality and constitute an attempt to make sense out of non-sense; to show individuals' attempts to come to terms with uncertainty, however, makes perfect sense.

Boyd criticises other novelists for misrepresenting war. In a review of Timothy Findley's *The Wars*, Herman Wouk's *War and Remembrance* and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, for example, he argues that these three authors fail to acknowledge the individual and extremely personal nature of the experience of war, an experience which is a blend of the individual's intricate personality and the innumerable, unpredictable events which make up a war.¹⁵ Findley's, Wouk's and O'Brien's novels, argues Boyd, suggest that such experience is a common one, made up of stock ideas, attitudes and results. Fiction produces its own orthodoxy as it repeats a recognised formula: 'War is hell/shocking/depraved/inhuman but it provides intense and compensatory moments of comradeship/joy/vivacity/emotion or excitement.'¹⁶ This is an irresponsible representation, argues Boyd, which arises from an incorrect view of the true nature of battle (a fault shared with military historians) and a tacit approval of war as a means of ennoblement through heightened awareness. While the first fault may be explained by lack of information or experience, the second has become a value judgement which has begun to influence historical and documentary accounts, including films.

While John James Todd does indeed reinforce the myth of constant battle and brutal fighting, he never suggests in his two films that war is ennobling. The truth is shocking and must be made known to those who cannot see it at first hand. This is the artist's mission. As already observed, Todd does not, however, have the distance to his subject that William Boyd enjoys in *The Trench*. Todd is, of course, part of the development of the very early stages of the film-making industry. He is concerned with finding new possibilities for the technology at his disposal 'to escape the limitations of the frame.'¹⁷ He films small groups and entire regiments. William Boyd, on the other hand, brings out the individual perspective, and in so doing demonstrates the uncertainty of war on the personal level. There is nothing noble about war in Boyd's film: it is all about fear of the unknown and anticipation of death. Sacrifice is unpleasant, messy, and utterly pointless.

John James Todd at war

Todd is initially stationed at Nieuport-les-Bains in Belgium, at a safe distance from the fighting. He is a Private in the 13th (Public School) service battalion of the Duke of Clarence's Own South Oxfordshire Light Infantry, a company composed entirely of public-school boys. In July 1917 he moves up to Ypres. Todd participates in the attack which results in mass slaughter on both sides. He is subsequently attached to the Grampian Highlanders, joining them in a second attack at Ypres. His

nightmare as a soldier comes to an end when he enlists in the WOCC (War Office Cinema Committee). Todd recognises that his new job gives him an invaluable opportunity to represent the truth of war as he sees it. In this mission he is thwarted not only by the earlier described technical restrictions but also by the censors. With considerable ingenuity, Todd is able to overcome many of the technical difficulties; the censors, on the other hand, prove to be a greater stumbling block. His war films are soon forgotten and, as Todd notes with sadness, they receive no mention in official publications such as *The Movie Encyclopaedia*.¹⁸

While waiting at Ypres, Todd describes how his reactions fluctuate between 'the roles soulless functionary and uniquely precious individual human being; from the disposable to the *sine qua non*.'¹⁹ The truth is not somewhere in between but a combination of both. Todd recognises that the reality of war reflects life in general: each individual is blessed with an account of good fortune which can become overdrawn, not as a consequence of one's actions but as a result of the haphazard nature of the universe.²⁰ Sometimes Todd accepts this as a fact, sometimes he reacts against it in a spirit of anger or depression. The chaos and destruction that he witnesses at Ypres change him forever. The film industry rescues Todd from insanity, or a worse fate.²¹

Todd's first war film, 'Great British Regiments', focuses on the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. He uses the film chiefly to master the technique of the Aeroscope. He is not interested at this stage in filming action or battles, as his primary concern is technical rather than representational. The film shows soldiers taking part in everyday activities: receiving food at a field kitchen, playing football, listening to songs, and marching up to the front.²² It observes activity, it does not judge. But it does contain emotion, in the form of a row of shattered trees. As the soldiers march to the front they follow a line of poplars which reminds them of their own, probable destiny—if they do not meet death today, then perhaps it will be tomorrow—or the next day. They do not know, they fear. Todd experiments a great deal with the camera in order to understand its strengths and limitations. In the absence of sound, it is the camera alone that can 'speak'.

Todd's first film is significant not so much for what it does but for what it does not allow him to do, i.e. be his own master. He is furious with the censor who has removed his favourite scene, the one where a sergeant major is feeding his pet squirrel jam. This is the individual and human side of war which provides a contrast to the more general battle scenes that otherwise dominate Todd's film. The censor fails to appreciate the scene's significance. It is at this point that Todd decides to become a director. Like his creator, he wants total control.²³ Such control is, however, as Todd later discovers, only an illusion: it remains unattainable in a universe governed by uncertainty.

Todd's second film endeavours to tell a story which is autobiographical and which attempts to impose order on what he otherwise describes as the 'loosely related fragments' of the soldier's life at the front.²⁴ This is the experience of battle common to most soldiers; it is also the fictional director's own experience. As an autobiographical text, Todd's film conceals as well as reveals. The film's title, *The Aftermath of Battle*, suggests that the action is finished, but Todd is still part of the war, he does not know if he will live long enough to finish his film, and he is

unsure how many of those whom he films will be alive tomorrow. Neither does he know what the censor will say. How emotional can Todd afford to be? How can he make the truth as he sees it comprehensible to those who have never witnessed the kind of destruction so common at the front? The one question he does not ask himself, and which proves to be the downfall of the film, is 'how close can one come to the truth and satisfy the demands of the censor?'

While Todd in his second film unwittingly reinforces the myth of the predominance of battle on the western front he does at the same time express a conscious desire to destroy another myth promoted by fellow film directors. For Todd, this myth is encapsulated in the principle that fortitude ultimately leads to victory.²⁵ Unfortunately, Todd's noble aim gradually becomes dominated by a concern for cinematic effect: his focus is increasingly on the form rather than the message. There is no script for *The Aftermath of Battle*. Todd assures the reader that the latter is unnecessary because the outline is clear in his head. When the film is rejected by the censor, he tells himself that it is because it expresses the truth, 'unflinching verisimilitude.'²⁶ The shocking scenes of the final stages of the battle, the corpses lying on the ground, and the pictures of labour battalions digging grave after grave are, as the censors recognise, likely to cause widespread condemnation in Britain. What Todd fails to understand is that in his attempt to portray the truth of battle he has presented only one aspect of life at the front. This is a very limited perspective on reality, and one which draws the viewer's attention towards the technique of filming, thereby detracting from the message itself. The truth has become compromised both in terms of content and by method of representation. That this is not by intention is demonstrated by Todd's attitude towards the cinematographer, Harold Faithfull.

Faithfull specialises in censor-friendly versions of the truth. He has technical expertise but, unlike Todd, he is not interested in exploring or extending this. The difference between the two producers is their attitude to the relationship between representation and the represented: while Todd allows fascination for technology to become increasingly important, his main concern is still the truth as he sees it; Faithfull, on the other hand, uses the advances of technology to produce a 'tidy version' of reality which is far removed from the horrors of the western front. This prompts Todd to continue working with *The Aftermath of Battle*, extending it from its original 22 minutes to a full-length feature film exposing the full horrors of what had taken place before the carnage depicted in the original version. It is in the full-length version of the film that Todd comes closest to the philosophy reflected in Boyd's *The Trench*. The way this is manifested, however, is very different.

Violent battle sequences become Todd's focus. He must learn how to film speed, a new feature of war films. Returning to Ypres, Todd films an Australian company as it goes into the third battle of Ypres. He is wounded in the hand and forced to discontinue his project, but not before he has captured what he describes as 'real battle'. 'It was the best and most authentic battle sequence filmed in the entire First World War . . . ; it was inglorious, entirely chaotic and, if it had not been true, incomprehensibly and indisputably dull', records Todd.²⁷ The truth about battle is that it is full of uncertainty because it is chaotic. Battle is also monotonous. This comes as a surprise both to Todd himself and to the reader. Todd captures the action and destruction of battle; to this extent, he reinforces the myth of

World War One upheld by other writers and film-makers. But Todd is also different from other directors because he tries to highlight the monotony of the process as he captures one soldier after another collapsing, in almost identical fashion. Only by careful and innovative modification of his equipment, e.g. placing his camera on a tripod with shortened legs so that the entire structure can be moved easily and without being re-assembled for each new scene, can Todd capture what has not been illustrated before. The truth of battle is dependent on technological advancement for its illumination. It also requires imagination both on the part of the film maker and viewer. When the censors stop *The Aftermath of Battle*, Todd sees this as a denial of the medium as well as the message; it is also a personal rejection: Todd's talent is clearly neither understood nor appreciated.

Todd's films combine certainty and uncertainty to heighten suspense. It is certain that several—perhaps most—of the soldiers will die. It is less certain which soldiers will be sacrificed. Neither can one know when death will take place. Todd knows that he is taking a personal risk by returning to the western front to film, and he knows the danger is magnified by his choice of method, i.e. running ahead of the soldiers and filming from holes in the ground. Todd is not surprised when he is wounded; he recognises that this is the risk he must take in the service of truth. *The Aftermath of Battle* marks the end of Todd's period in the trenches. The next time he sees these it is from a balloon, several hundred feet above ground. Only then can Todd make sense of the pattern of roads and streams. For the first time, he realises how localised the trenches are and how small is the world of mud that was the limits of his existence as a fighting soldier. When Todd's balloon is attacked by an enemy aeroplane and he is forced to land in hostile territory, he is captured and imprisoned, and a new life can begin. What Todd has learned about film and truth can now be put to good use in his reading and filming of Rousseau's *Confessions*.²⁸

Reviewers such as Francis King²⁹ have accused Boyd of shapelessness in *The New Confessions* as the novel moves apparently randomly between the western front and an island in the Mediterranean in the 1970s. This is not, I suggest, shapelessness but a metaphor for Todd's life. While Todd's war films fall into oblivion and the Rousseau film is never completed, his life cannot be regarded as a failure: he has discovered in old age that he is finally in tune with the universe, and he has learned to accept its uncertainty. 'It has been deeply paradoxical and fundamentally uncertain. That's how I would sum the whole business up, my time on this small planet—deeply paradoxical and fundamentally uncertain.'³⁰ This process began on the western front, in the depth of the trenches, and is given full expression through the medium of film.

The end of Todd's life and career does not, however, mark the end of William Boyd's fascination with World War One. Eleven years after the publication of *The New Confessions*, he concluded his engagement with the war in *The Trench*, 112 minutes of suspense and uncertainty.

The Trench

'Incomprehensibly and indisputably dull'; this, as noted above, is how Todd describes his final war film. Some critics have also levied the same criticism at William Boyd's *The Trench*. Jonathan Romney, for example, grudgingly remarks with respect to the portrayal of the soldiers waiting for their death: 'If Boyd's film

succeeds at all, it's in making that wait as painful and often as dull as it is for his characters.'³¹ This is, of course, precisely what Boyd intended.

In an interview with Alistair Owen, Boyd explains that he had originally hoped to become a painter. Directing films satisfies what Boyd describes as 'the painterly side of my nature, reflected in the compositional and choreographical elements of film-making.'³² *The Trench* is, by Boyd's own admission, the culmination of an ambition and a manifestation of an obsession with World War One.³³ The film had a small budget and was directed in only eight weeks. Most of the filming was done at the Bray Film Studios, Windsor, England.

Boyd is fascinated less by the historical significance of the war and more by character and story, by the potential inherent in these, and by the imaginative possibilities which they present. After several weeks of conducting research at the Imperial War Museum in London and studying numerous World-War-One film reels, Boyd watched a short newsreel about a burial party. What struck him were the misery and the dread on the faces of the young soldiers as they marched towards an uncertain future. This became the germ of *The Trench*.

The Trench is highly claustrophobic. The action takes place almost entirely in the trenches. The soldiers cannot see over the top. Their world is framed by the edges of the trench, where they sit and wait for days and hours on end. Action is restricted to rescuing the injured from isolated explosions. The dialogue between the young soldiers is the central feature. At the same time, Boyd makes use of captions to demonstrate the passing of time and to remind the viewer that this is a World-War-One film. Boyd's soldiers are young, ordinary and not particularly well-educated. They are, as Nicholas J. Cull observes, unsophisticated both in terms of language and interests.³⁴ Their humanity, however, is never in doubt.

The narrative is divided into 12 chapters as in a book. It follows an eighteen-year-old volunteer, Billy McFarlane. It is Billy who gives voice to the uncertainty of war. And even his death at the end of the film is characterised by doubt: he is frozen in a still, by which the viewer must deduce—it is never explicitly stated—that Billy does indeed die. The fate of the soldiers remains uncertain until the final few minutes of the film, when they go over the top. It is only then that they learn that they will be in the first and not the third—and considerably safer—wave, as originally promised.

To enable the actors to gain some insight into what it meant to be a soldier at the western front they were placed in a re-constructed trench in southern England for a day and a night. They had no blankets, and the food they were given resembled that of World-War-One army rations both in terms of content and quality. The soldiers have a variety of accents: north English, Irish, Scottish and, in the case of the officers (and the cameraman), public-school English. It is above all in the dialogue that Boyd strives after realism. The soldiers do not debate the causes of the war or the merits or flaws of their commanding officers: they focus on basic human subjects such as love and physical attraction. Their language is punctuated by 'fuck', probably the most common word in the entire film. Much of the dialogue is banal. The conversations lead nowhere and draw no conclusions, thereby mirroring the soldiers' physical situation. The film has a nightmarish quality which echoes John James Todd's remark in *The New Confessions*: film derives its power from recreating what has been going on in our unconscious.³⁵ It is the

most basic human needs and drives that come to the fore in *The Trench*.

Both Boyd's novel and his film constitute 'responsible representation' as defined by W.J.T. Mitchell. In both *The New Confessions* and *The Trench*, the cinematographer is called Harold Faithfull. Despite his surname, Faithfull is responsible for producing a false picture of the truth at the western front. John James Todd's horror at Faithfull's representations of war is echoed by his creator in *The Trench*: Faithfull is portrayed as a director of fiction, in which the camera lens is used to produce a version of reality which constitutes pure propaganda, and where the soldiers are actors in a depiction of the war which they know to be false. Just as Faithfull orchestrates the battle at Glencorse Wood in *The New Confessions* to produce a tidy version of reality, he focuses in *The Trench* on outmoded notions of glory and patriotism which have little to do with the actual conditions in the trenches.

The scene in Boyd's film in which Faithfull films Colonel Villiers visiting the troops is a tightly orchestrated performance, a fact emphasised at the very beginning by the colonel's question to Faithfull, 'What sort of thing are you after?' When Faithfull tells the colonel that it does not matter what he says to the men (the film is, of course, silent), he reads the following caption to the colonel: 'Morale is high'. He then assures the colonel that 'you can say anything you like'. Faithfull smiles with satisfaction as the colonel assures the men that 'success is guaranteed'. And the fiction is reinforced by Faithfull's comment to the Colonel: 'that was wonderful'. Faithfull uses the camera to cut off the truth, quite literally: at the end of the scene, when the soldiers wave the blue, red and white banner, only half of the text appears in the lens of what is intended to represent a World-War-One camera: 'God Save the King' is shortened to 'God Save'. The viewer who is familiar with the terrible events of the Battle of the Somme may reflect that it is perhaps the soldiers who are in greatest need of being saved. Significantly, it is Boyd's modern camera that reveals the complete text on the banner. Both John James Todd and William Boyd condemn without reservation the films directed by Harold Faithfull.

Boyd uses actual World-War-One pictures and the earlier-mentioned silent-film technique of captions to create a feeling of authenticity. *The Trench* is not, however, the version of World War One that film viewers expect. It is an imaginative reconstruction which enhances 'the claustrophobia, hemmed-in, rabbit-warren feel' of the trenches;³⁶ a glimpse of reality limited almost exclusively to a trench eight feet deep and three to four feet wide. Boyd hopes to provide 'an emotional charge which will be overpowering and a visual record the like of which you've never seen.'³⁷

The opening scene in *The Trench* focuses on the as yet anonymous protagonist, Billy MacFarlane. The young soldier, portrayed in black and white, marches to his death. Who is this man? Where is he? Why does he look straight into the camera? The authentic still photographs of soldiers in the trenches which appear on the screen as Billy marches towards the camera freeze time as the names of the actors appear. With the sudden transformation from black to colour as the soldiers march into the trench, the film leaves old technology behind and enters the modern world. Only the occasional captions and the scene with Harold Faithfull remind the viewer that two levels of technology are represented in Boyd's film.

The captions are short and provide important details related

almost exclusively to the passing of time. The first caption tells the viewer that it is 'high summer 1916'. The scene is Northern France. This is to be 'the biggest offensive of the First World War'. The name of the place is not provided, but the viewer knows it is the Somme, a battle imprinted in the collective memory of the nations making up the Allied Forces. Approximately sixty thousand men lost their lives or were injured on the first day alone. The progression of time is marked by captions: 29th June 1916; 30th June 1916; 1st July 1916; 5.30 a.m.; 5.45 a.m.; 6.57 a.m. Months are replaced by minutes towards the end. There is no caption for the last 33 minutes: it is not needed, the soldiers' anxiety, reflected in their faces and questions, tells us that time is running out. By this time, we have become acquainted with the soldiers who are about to go over the top. They are not just part of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers about to march to their deaths but have names: Billy MacFarlane, Eddie Macfarlane (Billy's older brother), Victor Dell, Colin Daventry, Lieutenant Harte, Sergeant Winter, Horace Beckwith and George Hogg.

A short biography of each of the soldiers, written by Boyd, is featured on the DVD. The actors introduce themselves in interviews (the interviewer is anonymous, and it is not clear if the interviews took place before or after the shooting of the film). These short, autobiographical texts, while interesting, reveal, in fact, very little about the characters themselves; the viewer suspects that they are intended to conceal as much as they reveal as part of the theatrical effect. Billy describes himself as 'only a kid'; he is 17 years old, 'street-wise' and a survivor; his personality changes at the front as he experiences the horrors of war and as he shares these with his fellow soldiers. Eddie emphasises his Manchester background and his working-class origins. Victor Dell is a cockney, 'the bad one of the bunch', though no reasons are given for this negative self-judgement. Horace Beckwith and George Hogg, both from Scotland, represent the innocence of the volunteer: Horace believes he will be able to avenge the death of his brother at the front in 1914, and he is filled with a blind faith in his officers. George follows Horace; he enlists quite simply because everyone else is joining up.

Colin Daventry is the cynic of the group, and the one most aware of the hopelessness of the soldiers' situation. He is educated and the only one to recognise that the real nature of the soldiers' situation is being deliberately concealed by the officers. Colin is the most verbal and reflective of all the soldiers and a source of admiration for Billy. He is also the only actor/soldier to be interviewed who reflects on his responsibility to represent the truth: 'It's clearly an acting job, but you can't get away from the fact that hundreds of thousands of people died in the First World War, and hundreds of thousands of relatives. Everyone knows someone who was involved in the First World War'. Art and history merge for Colin Daventry.

The two officers, Lieutenant Harte and Sergeant Winter, keep to themselves the truth of the soldiers' situation and their probable death. Their conversations relate primarily to communication—or the lack of it. When Lieutenant Harte states that he 'has found a way of communicating with his sergeant', the implication is that this does not extend to the men. Sergeant Winter is concerned with the ignorance and lack of preparation of the soldiers; his main task is two-fold: to prevent the men from running away, and to 'keep the truth away from them.'

The truth about the tragedy of the Somme is never revealed in the film. Our knowledge of history, combined with the

captions marking time, fill in some of the gaps left by the director. Our concern is for the eight soldiers, seven of whom clearly have very little understanding of the nature of war. From the beginning, Sergeant Winter protects Billy. He deliberately avoids answering the young soldier's question about what it is like in No Man's Land, and his promise to provide the answer 'in plenty of time' is never fulfilled. When Billy discovers the remains of several soldiers who have been blown to pieces, his first word, as he is choking with fear and revulsion, is 'Serge'. The night before the battle, Billy recognises that even his hero is nervous, and he admits to Sergeant Winter that he 'can't stop thinking'. Winter cannot come up with any suitable response. As the morning of the battle arrives, Billy is still trying to find out the truth. He knows that Sergeant Winter has already seen battle and asks an apparently simple question, 'So what's it like?' It appears that Sergeant Winter is finally going to tell Billy the truth; it is, however, too late. He gets no further than the empty words: 'When you go over the top, to another world, to a place'—and the bombardment begins. Billy does not ask Sergeant Winter to complete the sentence; he does, however, continue to fire questions, despite the noise of the guns. The simple question, 'What do we do next, Serge?' indicates the full extent of Billy's ignorance and inexperience. He needs reassurance that he will not be left behind should he be injured or killed. The end of Sergeant Winter's words of comfort is lost in the noise. Billy clings on to the hope that he is indeed a survivor, as Sergeant Winter suggests, but he can only guess at the last words in what turns out to be the Sergeant's final pronouncement: 'I know the type who gets through and you're....'

The final scene demonstrates that Sergeant Winter is wrong about Billy's fate. Billy is frozen in a black and white still. He has been shot. A trail of blood leads from his head and is frozen in mid air. Is Billy wounded or dead? What happens to his body? Are any of his friends alive? There is no caption to verify Billy's fate; the picture in itself cannot finish the story. Billy's questions to Sergeant Winter are finally answered in action, outside the trench, in the world that he has feared so intensely and enters for just a few fateful minutes. His journey of discovery is short, brutal and final. There is, we understand, absolutely nothing Sergeant Winter could have said or done to prepare him for this.

...

A comparison of William Boyd's *The New Confessions* and *The Trench* illustrates the tendency of autobiographical texts and pictures to conceal as well as reveal. John James Todd's account of his film-making career during World War One and Boyd's film *The Trench* demonstrate that both film directors see themselves as responsible representers of the truth as they strive to demonstrate the painful and paradoxical uncertainty of the human condition during time of war. This truth is part of a process of representation which is subject to limitations related to the directors' purpose, field of vision, and access to, as well as quality of the technology available. Both directors criticise Harold Faithfull's attempts to simplify and glorify reality, and both have a clear message to transmit: the uncertainty of war is part of the overall ambiguity of life. Todd and Boyd have served their time in the trenches, and both come to the conclusion that 'this is the Age of Uncertainty and Incompleteness'.³⁸ To accept this fact is to be in tune with the universe. When Todd remarks that he has 'hunkered down in the mulch of the phenomenal world',³⁹ the reader of the novel and the viewer of *The Trench*

are reminded of the miserable conditions in the trenches. Unlike the soldiers in Boyd's film, we, the viewers, are survivors—but like the fictional John James Todd, we will carry their memory with us, and it will change us, just as it has changed William Boyd. With *The New Confessions* and *The Trench*, Boyd has indeed 'done his time' in the trenches; it is 'his own time', and there is no need to return. As the continued production of novels and films about World War One and the western front demonstrates, the same cannot be said, however, for present-day readers and writers. While Boyd's fascination with World War One is satisfied, we may well feel that ours is not.

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Notes

- 1 William Boyd, *The New Confessions* (New York: Vintage, 1988).
- 2 William Boyd, *The Trench*, 1999. 112 minutes. Colour. DVD distributed by Somme Productions.
- 3 This film, existing in the fictional text alone and designed to be the culmination of Todd's dream, is mentioned only occasionally in the following discussion as it is never completed, and because the focus here is on World War One.
- 4 William Boyd, *Bamboo* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008).
- 5 William Boyd, *Any Human Heart* (London: Penguin, 2002), p.7.
- 6 *Bamboo*, p.211.
- 7 Quoted by Pierre Vitoux, 'The Uses of Parody in William Boyd's *The New Confessions*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 42, Spring 2000, pp.79-90 (86).
- 8 Timothy Dow Adams, *Light Writing and Life Writing. Photography in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. xxi.
- 9 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), p.6
- 10 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.91.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.325.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.421.
- 13 *Bamboo*, pp.41-2.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.42.
- 15 Re-printed in *Bamboo* (2008), 'War in Fiction', pp.115-121.
- 16 *Bamboo*, p.115.
- 17 *The New Confessions*, p.281.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.365.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.127.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp.134-5.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp.148-9.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p.150.
- 23 William Boyd writes: '*The Trench* can sit on the shelf with any of my novels because, although it's a huge collaboration, it's exactly as I'd hoped it would be' (*Bamboo*, p.442).
- 24 *Ibid.*, p.152.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p.152.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p.156.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p.161.
- 28 Todd explains that 'Rousseau and his autobiography delivered me. I never forgot that precious, exceptional gift. The book, as you will see, was to become my life' (*The New Confessions*, p.208).
- 29 *The Spectator*, 3rd October 1987.
- 30 *The New Confessions*, p.476.
- 31 Jonathan Romney, 'On the limitations of William Boyd's war story', *New Statesman*, 20th September 1999, p.46.
- 32 *Bamboo*, p.441.
- 33 William Boyd, 'Seeking Answers Down in the Trenches'. *The New York Times*, Sunday 19th November, 2000.
- 34 'The Trench', *American Historical Review*, April 2001, pp.697-8.
- 35 *The New Confessions*, p.186.
- 36 Interview with William Boyd, *The Trench*.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 *The New Confessions*, p.476.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p.476.

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Formal Innovation and Feminist Freedom

VERA CHYTILOVÁ'S *DAISIES*

by ALISON FRANK

In addition to being considered one of the founding filmmakers of the Czech New Wave,¹ Vera Chytilová was its most experimental director. This article will take as its case study her innovative 1966 film *Sedmikrásky* (*Daisies*).² In this film, Chytilová uses a diverse range of techniques including sudden changes from black-and-white to tinted or colour film stock, fast-forwarded segments and non-naturalistic sound effects. The film also subverts conventions of continuity editing to create an impression of the impossible: by linking two shots, it makes it appear as though characters can step from their apartment directly into a distant landscape, in a manner evocative of Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou* (1929). This formal daring is an inseparable dimension of any message in her films. 'I want to give new meaning to a film with my editing', Chytilová declared, firmly associating formal properties with rhetorical objectives: 'I want to put things together in a new way'.³

In *Daisies*, the director's own philosophy of filmmaking was complemented by that of her cinematographer, Jaroslav Kucera, who wanted the film image to escape from a strictly objective vocation. Kucera believed that the film should acquire the same power of 'subjective meaning' as other modern arts such as poetry, music and painting.⁴ The audience's role in creating the film's meaning is thus crucial and yet comes with freedom as the film is by no means restricted to one or even a set of correct interpretations.

Although many Czech New Wave directors moved away from conventional narrative and documentary-inspired realism in favour of formal experiment,⁵ Chytilová's approach was nonetheless remarkably 'disjunctive' by comparison with that of her contemporaries. Czech New Wave scholar Peter Hames has suggested that the practical purpose of this fragmentation was to 'encourage a critical attitude towards the reality presented'.⁶ Chytilová's formal experimentation involves techniques which take away from cinema's impression of documenting physical reality in a direct manner. These techniques instead serve to draw audiences in and encourage them to change the way in which they usually think about film's impression of reality. At the same time, the artifice which the director imposes on the



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film image is balanced by an attention to the natural world which emphasises its physical properties, and which gives the audience a familiar reality with which to orient themselves. Moreover, in *Daisies* the sensual characteristics of the natural world create an eroticism with a comic effect that contributes overwhelmingly to undermining the established socio-sexual order.

Daisies' desultory narrative follows two adolescent sisters who take the commonplace cliché that 'everything is going bad' as licence to behave as badly as they like. They play disruptive or destructive games that undermine traditional values of respect for people and property. The naturalist emphasis which acts as a complement to the film's formal experiment is achieved in part through locations which underline physical rather than intellectual aspects of human existence. The places featured most prominently are restaurants and a banquet hall (seven times), where enjoyment of food moves from the gourmet to the grotesque. The next most common locations all allude to sensual acts or bodily functions. The girls appear in their bedroom six times: there they engage in physical games, eat sexually suggestive foods, and parade in *dishabillé*. Public toilets serve as location on five occasions: the girls are seen emerging from the cubicles or attending to their appearance. A pier is also used five times: this is the location of the film's opening scene, and a place where the girls are seen wearing bikinis and enjoying the sunshine, sometimes watching men.

A large part of the destruction that takes place in the film is a result of the girls' insatiable love of food, a greed which has enough social stigma attached to it to stand in for sexual appetite in women. It is thus through its use of food that the film's emphasis on the physical world also evokes its sensual or even erotic dimension. Further, this eroticism has a comic effect which is subversive to social order. Towards the end of the film, when the sisters destroy a carefully laid out banquet before the guests' arrival, they take pleasure in eating with their hands, or simply squeezing food between their fingers and throwing it at each other. Similarly, dinner dates in the film become a sort of one-meal-stand in which the girls are in the position of control: they take advantage of the gourmet pleasures offered to them by their suitors and, once the bill is paid, rid themselves of the men as quickly as possible. Pointing out the purely sexual motivation of older men who take young women out for dinner, Chytilová subverts the model so that the girls simultaneously define the nature of their own sensual pleasure and make use of men before men can make use of them. Having undermined the practice of polite conversation by asking the older suitor inappropriate questions, one of the girls squirts cream into his face as she takes an enormous mouthful of cake, thus emphasising the erotic element in their enjoyment of food with a comical effect.

A later scene which takes place in the girls' bedroom seems to foreground the erotic aspect of food with far less subtlety, evoking a clichéd sexual symbolism. The scene in question involves a variety of food items, every one of which is either phallic (sausages, bread rolls, pickles, bananas, and general references to meat) or else alludes to feminine fertility (eggs and fruit). The fact that the girls are burning, cutting or impaling the phallic food items seems no more than an easy way of indicating their lack of sympathy for men, already shown by the way in which they are ignoring the voice of a suitor on the telephone as he begs one of the sisters to return to him. Yet the

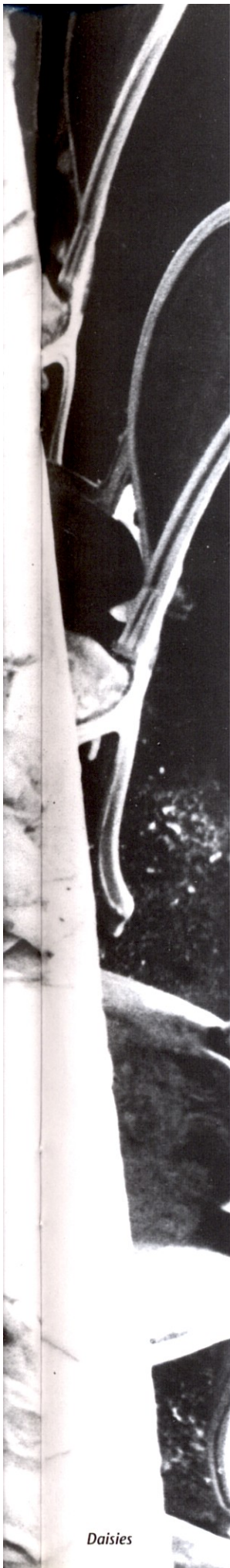
girls treat objects evoking female fecundity in the same violent manner (one even attempts to cut the other's toe with scissors and pierce her pelvic area with a fork). It is ultimately not entirely clear whether there is any real aggression in the girls' play with these evocative food items, or whether they are simply pointing out the generally aggressive and destructive nature of both digestion and reproduction.

Peter Hames has noted that *Daisies* features numerous 'allusions with variations on cliché',⁷ and this practice has a strong influence on the creation of hybrid objects in the film, as was demonstrated in the previous scene. The sequence in the film that comes closest to being a 'seduction scene' also begins with a cliché: butterflies feature prominently, as in Czech culture they symbolise sex.⁸ Yet this very symbolism is denaturalised: the excessive emphasis placed on the butterflies is an unnecessary amplification of a scene in which sexual intent is already manifest. The scene takes place between one of the girls and a man about twice her age, and begins with his clichéd declarations of love ('you're so earthly, yet so heavenly!') in voice-over with images of his collection of butterfly specimens. His adoration quickly turns to frustration, however, and he resorts to playing a lively tune on the piano. At this point, further shots of dead butterflies appear in a frenzied montage that matches the pace of the music, while two inter-cut shots show the girl taking down the straps of her brassiere. When he finally approaches her, his emotion continuing to intensify, the piano music and montage of butterflies return. This time they are much closer shots which show the detail of individual butterflies' wings as if to reflect the fact that the man is closer to the object of his admiration. The naked girl holds up cases of butterflies in an apparently simple allusion to the erogenous zones she is hiding beneath them.

Yet the butterfly is not only a symbol for sex or erotic passion in this scene: the butterflies as objects actually come between the man and the girl he apparently desires. When he comes close to her, instead of taking away the butterfly case covering her pubic area, he removes the butterfly, leaving the case where it is. This is not, moreover, a modest metaphor for the sexual act. When the girl moves away in surprise and bumps the butterfly case on the wall behind her, she is able to escape the man's embrace because he is more concerned with saving the butterflies than pursuing her. There is, in fact, uncertainty about the object of the man's admiration from the beginning of the scene: his voiced-over admiration seems to refer to the butterflies that fill the frame, while the girl to whom he is actually speaking is only revealed later. By the end of the scene, the ambiguity of reference has returned, as it seems possible that the man is most concerned with butterflies as beautiful objects to be collected, rather than the sexual activity that the butterflies symbolise. His obsession with the butterflies serves as an apt metaphor for the notion that the man's idealised impression of the object of his affection does not correspond to who she really is. Chytilová satirises any fixed ideal of the feminine by means of a male character who ignores the real woman in front of him in order to admire beautiful but dead butterflies.

Chytilová similarly satirises fixed images in the media through cut-out images evoking a cliché which is then undermined. The first instance of such an object is a rose which one sister is seen cutting out of a magazine. Its symbolic charge comes from the montage in which it is involved just before it is cut out. The other sister answers the phone with the blackly





Daisies

humorous words, 'Rehabilitation centre. Die, die, die!', then repeats the joke by dialling a number and uttering the final exclamation another three times, each word this time accompanied by a glossily professional image of a rose or bouquet of roses, the diegetic source of which has not yet been revealed. The scene seems to downplay the youth, beauty and innocence with which the film (playing on traditional stereotype) most frequently associates flowers, and instead reminds the audience of flowers' association with funerals, with short-lived beauty and hence mortality. However, death is also evoked by the finality of the fixed media image, which is as oppressive as the feminine ideal associated with the (dead) butterfly specimen. Chytilová had temporarily worked as a model early in her career, but she expressed her disillusion with the modelling world in *Strop* (*The Ceiling*, 1963), which she made as her graduation film from FAMU, the Czechoslovak national film school.⁹ *Daisies* also involves reference to the fashion world,¹⁰ and when Chytilová makes use of photographs from magazines, it is likely a comment on the consequences of turning real people and objects into static images that then become commodities. Chytilová also pokes fun at the supposed substance behind commercial images in the earlier example of the phallic food scene: unable to satisfy their appetites with real food, one of the girls happily stuffs her mouth with a picture of food that has been cut out of a magazine. Later, the sisters concoct a suggestively fertile soup of milk, eggs, and a small cut-out image of a muscular young man. Adding this image to the soup is both a humorous and a mildly violent act, as a little picture of a man is obviously not the equivalent of a real man. Nonetheless, the iconic power of the image is enough to make it slightly sinister to push the cut-out man beneath the surface of the liquid, as though drowning him. The power that culture ascribes to beautiful images is once more playfully undermined when one sister tries to make a cut-out of the other. Rather than restricting herself to cutting the fabric on which her sister is lying, she cuts into her clothing and the girls begin a duel with scissors. Camera tricks give the impression that one sister has lost her arm and the other her head, but the girls' jokingly exaggerated reactions maintain a consistently humorous tone. Whether as film images or paper dolls, the girls refuse to conform to feminine standards of physical perfection, serenity and beauty, instead making ugly grimaces as they cheerfully dismember each other. It is the same refusal of conventional beauty that confronts the spectator in the film's opening scene: the bikini-clad girls may look like beautiful dolls, but their limbs make squeaking noises when they move, and the girls spoil their beauty with ugly gestures or sounds, as one puts her finger up her nose and the other blows an off-key note on a trumpet.

Daisies' use of humour serves not only to engage the spectator with its entertainment value but works as a key method to undermine cliché, particularly in relation to established gender roles. This humour was

based in an eroticism which derived from the sensual experience of the natural world. The girls' refusal to conform to restrictive definitions of femininity is often expressed through this very insistence on the physical, on highlighting sensuality or even eroticism in the very places where its presence is traditionally meant to be ignored.

The film has, as noted earlier, an experimental structure, which has been described as imitating music or poetry rather than conventional narrative.¹¹ The meaning associated with a certain category of object such as food, butterflies or the cut-out image is thus built up not only in the space of one scene but through a series of repeated appearances of these objects. The film offers an entry-point for the audience to begin thinking about the object in question by alluding to familiar, easily accessible meanings, typically based on cliché. However, each appearance of an object also moves beyond that meaning by suggesting other possible interpretations. One way in which Chytilová suggests alternate interpretations is to explore an aspect of the object in question which is less frequently considered (such as the oppressive nature of the fixed ideal, or the eroticism of consuming food). Another way that she expands meaning is by juxtaposing two clichés (such as flowers as symbols of youth and beauty or of death). The significance of an object is thereby not only shown to be hybrid but based on associations which may be in conflict. While suggesting these meanings, however, the film does not offer one correct way of interpretation, instead leaving much of this task up to the audience: it was Chytilová's express intention that there should be an 'active...interplay'¹² between the audience and the film and that each audience member should be 'free to interpret the film in his own way'.¹³ By radically opening up the meaning of the film to the spectator's subjectivity through its innovative techniques, *Daisies* makes room formally for alternate, feminist interpretations.

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Notes

- 1 Peter Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave*, 2nd ed. (London: Wallflower, 2005) 78.
- 2 Peter Hames, 'Czechoslovakia: After the Spring,' in *Post New Wave Cinema in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, ed. Daniel J. Goulding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 124.
- 3 Peter Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave*, 2nd ed. (London: Wallflower, 2005) 129.
- 4 *Ibid.* 189.
- 5 *Ibid.* 78.
- 6 *Ibid.* 200.
- 7 *Ibid.* 188-9.
- 8 *Ibid.* 191.
- 9 *Ibid.* 183-4.
- 10 *Ibid.* 191.
- 11 *Ibid.* 188.
- 12 *Ibid.* 196.
- 13 *Ibid.* 188.

Female Sexuality, Islam and the Global

LEILA MERRAKSHI'S CONTROVERSIAL FILM *MAROCK*

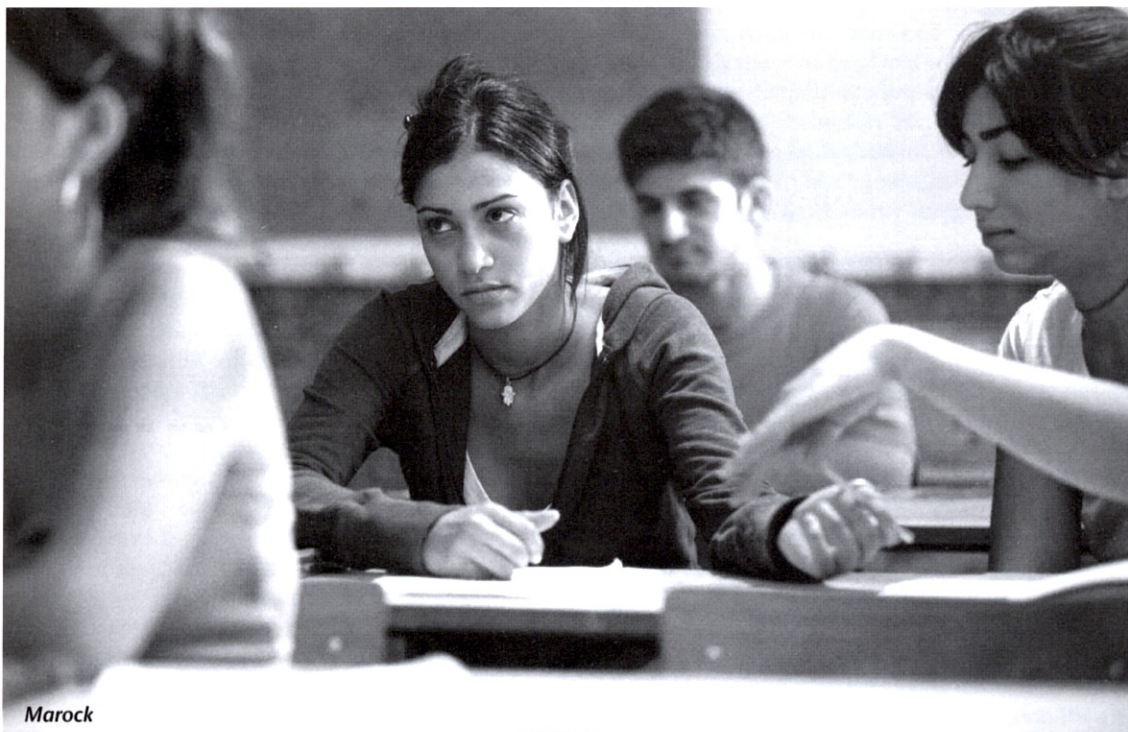
by TOURIA KHANNOUS



While new changes in Moroccan women's rights are attributed to the country's new reform-minded king, the late 1990s also saw a turning point for cinema in Morocco.¹ Over this period, an increasing number of feature films were produced in Morocco, opening up possibilities for the presence of women in most aspects of Moroccan cinema. Morocco's liberalization process under King Mohammed VI, whose government began to gradually loosen the political and cultural restrictions imposed on those involved in filmmaking, has guaranteed more freedom of expression for young artists and filmmakers.² There has also been an increase in the number of women filmmakers, whose films demonstrate that women in Moroccan society are not silent recipients of dominant discourses, but instead are active in their opposition and in expressing their voices.



The Moudawana, the new family code that went into effect in 2004, is significantly changing women's situation in Morocco, but not without serious struggle. This is reflected in films which have made a global impact with presentations of a post-colonial society undergoing rapid and controversial changes, such as the institution of new civil laws and the modernization of the family structure within which men are favored, but women are increasingly beginning to represent themselves. Leila Merrakshi is an important example of a Moroccan diasporic filmmaker whose film *Marock*³ made in 2005, one year after the new family code went into effect, presents tensions in a gender-driven society. The film director's gender is not incidental to the creation of a film that links her art and her life. In addition to telling an atypical story,



Marock

Marock reflects a creation that is closely linked to the personal experience of its director. A Moroccan woman who is married to a Jewish film director, her film can be read as a retelling and justification of her own youthful rebellion and choices. Her marriage is illegal under the Moroccan version of Muslim law. Changes in Moroccan law under the present king, however, have extended women's rights in Morocco and proved the compatibility of Islam and modernity with regard to the emancipation of women. The film suggests obvious parallels between the director's personal story and Rita's life after her romance with Yuri. The end of Rita's romance seems to open the way for discovery of self. For Merrakshi, re-defining the country of Morocco also means loss but something gained. The director has to leave Morocco in order to create art about it, and become personally involved with it again.⁴

Marock, which Merrakshi made in collaboration with a French production company while residing in France, represents a film that not only contains multicultural themes in its narrative, but is also a global production that necessitates the cooperation and coordination of the director and foreign producers. This film, which addresses viewers anywhere who are able to see it, is significant in terms of its popularity, its legitimate success, the controversies it has engendered, and the attempts to have it banned. *Marock* as a film is analogous to a spatial novel: one does not comprehend anything until one comprehends everything. A second viewing would change one's

interpretation of individual scenes. The director uses the camera mostly to show Rita's point of view, but the "fragmented narrative" is also reflected in a variety of points of view. The director's editing techniques suggest there are multiple points of view, for there are implications for adults who deal with the young, and for parents, the young require to be taken seriously.

The film created a stir when it was first shown, and met the anger of conservative critics who criticized what they have called "uncontrolled decadence". What we have seen in the course of the controversy is the struggle for recognition of a female director in the midst of what constitutes a growing trend of commercialized consumption of the female. As Morocco transitions to modernity, unruly female directors are now being scrutinized. This phenomenon presents today's Moroccan women film directors with a predicament peculiar to feminism and women's liberation.

Much of the film focuses on the female protagonist Rita, her parents' estate and its neighborhood, the roads that lead to it, the nearby ocean, the school which Rita attends, the ball court, and the nightclubs. Only toward the end of the film does the landscape begin to widen and the panorama include the big, high-rise city of Casablanca with its business and administrative centers that up until then have been in the background. Rita and her carefree high school friends appear to be having fun in the upscale Anfa district of Casablanca. The film highlights seduction in the fenced seaside estates with carefully tended foliage

and magnificent views, and in the modern furniture and tastefully assembled paintings, ceramics, and rugs. The tile-roofed and terraced white mansions reflect the sun, and the youth and glamor magazines indicate the easy life of the protagonists. The natural setting of the film is beautiful, but the domestic setting is opulent and consumerist-oriented. Servants appear to take care of everything, from cooking, to cleaning, and gardening.

The first scene features a parking lot, where between fancy cars of the young party-goers an older man is praying, but two boys, street children who sell cigarettes, are girl-watching, and one comments on the "poitrines" (bosoms). This first scene thus juxtaposes traditional piety with vulgarity. At the outset, Rita, the female protagonist, appears bad-tempered, disrespectful, and over-privileged. In one scene, she talks loudly on the phone while the gardener cuts the grass. In another scene, a police officer asks Rita and her friend Amine: "Where do you think you are, Sweden?" Rita is never portrayed in serious classroom discussion or conversation with a teacher. She is not interested in current events, nor does she show any affection for her parents or inquire about where her brother has been. The first scenes show only her desire for cigarettes, night-clubs, and sex. Rita is rude and defiant early in the film—she is aggressive, not having yet learned appropriate self-assertion. She also has no idea about the suffering that is yet to come, and for which she is so ill-prepared. Yet even while she enjoys the opulence of her home, she feels stifled and searches for release. Rita makes the viewer think of Holden Caulfield in "Catcher in the Rye," the privileged boy bounced out of yet another prep school, a boy with fencing foils but no tools or useful work. His father, an international lawyer, is represented by a briefcase; his mother languishes while grieving for the son lost in the war; a brother is on the opposite coast; and Holden's only confidante is his little sister Phoebe. His world is freezing, frozen: he asks "Where do the ducks go in winter?"⁵ So too Rita, for all the frivolity and sunshine, has been wondering where is her place and what is for her.

The female protagonist falls in love with Yuri, a handsome Jewish boy, who, too, seems to have no serious interests. Yuri is not seen practicing Judaism, and except for the Star of David he wears on a chain, the viewer would not guess he is a Jew. Yuri is shown as having neither a family nor a home. He only seems to have his car, which associates him with masculinity. The viewer learns nothing about Yuri's relation to Judaism, either religiously or culturally. Wearing the Star of David around his neck may be only a tag to prevent misapprehensions, or a token gift from a parent, or it may have no more significance than the brand, or university named on the t-shirts all the boys wear. The protagonists are represented as rebellious adolescents flouting their families' values. Privileged youth of many societies engage in premarital sex. For the religiously observant premarital sex is frowned upon. Also, a Muslim must not be involved in a romance with a non-Muslim. The inter-faith love affair is also frowned upon by observant Jews, since both Islam and Judaism try to preserve themselves by keeping marriage exclusive. The alarming conflict, however, turns out to be less about the inter-religious relationship than about the religiously observant versus the agnostically globalized secular. By representing the inter-faith love affair between a Muslim and a Jew, Merrakshi has been criticized for disrespecting Moroccan cul-

ture. But why should a woman filmmaker's exploration of alternative sexualities elicit a call for censorship? Does this film represent a threat to traditional notions of womanhood?

Marock is a provocative film that has been so shocking to the Moroccan audience in part because of the way it has handled issues of female sexuality, Muslim identity, national identity, the accommodation of the "other", disregard of "family values", the sense of entitlement of the elite, and confrontations that arise from crossing denominational lines. The film shows Casablanca to the provinces, portraying Western-style worldliness to the more tradition-minded, and that is a good basis for controversy. Merrakshi's critics also condemn the film's disrespectful portrayal of Islam. It is clear in the film that the Muslim calendar is observed traditionally, though not meaningfully, since Rita's parents do not manifest religious values. In one scene, Rita's parents are watching a service on television when they proclaim: "Thank God Ramadan is over." Nevertheless when Mao, Rita's brother, reveals his sister's love affair to them, they object to their daughter's relationship with a Jew. Gender issues in the film certainly underlie the tension of good son/ bad daughter in Rita's family's home. Rita's brother, sides with the parents, for that is where his advantage lies. Joining the pyramids of power may be more tempting for the males; they can play first, and then settle down, when their families insist on their marrying well.

The parents' nonchalant attitude towards religion seems to have inspired their son Mao to seek something deeper and more authentic, while provoking an opposite reaction in Rita. Mao is portrayed as serious: he prays after arriving home from the airport, and he visits a cemetery. He has previously caused the death of a man in a car accident, and that is why we see him guided by the blind caretaker to the grave of the victim who died young. What we do not know is whether the brother has already "sown his wild oats" and buckled down to the prescribed role. We also do not know how he behaves when he is in London, away from the parental domain. Rita, however, has not accepted any authority; she defies the police, the servants, her family, and a religion that has not made her happy. She clearly proclaims: "*je n'ai pas besoin de la religion pour dormir tranquille*" (I do not need religion in order to sleep peacefully). In one scene she stands in a bikini mocking her brother who was prostrating in prayer. She is also shown eating and smoking during Ramadan. Religion seems to offer nothing that Rita can desire or respect, only prohibitions that oppress her. Rita seems in search of an authority to which she would be glad to consent. Were she to care greatly about her material advantages, she might look forward only to marrying someone like her brother. That is not what she seems to desire when she associates with boys who seem neither serious nor promising. Yet the brother arrogates to himself, on religious grounds, an authority over his sister that she resists and resents; she refuses to accept comfort from him, though he tries forcefully to impose it. He has not supported her spiritual needs and she will not let him reclaim her. Her recorded music which plays English lyrics shows her rebelliousness "No, Love, you're not alone," and "You're too old to do that."

The release of this quasi-Hollywood film into a Moroccan society still considered "traditional" and trying gradually to modernize while remaining appropriate to the region, and

without adopting Western secular mores created a shocking scandal, a crackdown and repercussions elsewhere. The push to ban *Marock* was led by conservative politicians who likely never saw the film. According to Abdelilah Benkirane, a member of Parliament for the Islamist opposition Justice and Development Party, the film "shocked the entire population...It doesn't deserve to be seen and shouldn't be authorized in a Muslim country."⁶ The Secretary General of the Moroccan Theatre Syndicate, Mohammed Hassan El Joundi observes that "this kind of production must not be screened in a country which respects its traditions." El Joundi adds: "...this communiqué is not addressed to *Marock* only, but to all artistic creations having the intention of blemishing the reputation of our country. Everything has a limit, including freedom."⁷ Nabil Lahlou, Moroccan director, condemned Leila Merrakshi's *Marock* and said "the film has nothing to do with Morocco because it serves all kinds of cultural colonialism."⁸ Such criticism also raises questions about Merrakshi's own Moroccan identity: In what sense is Merrakshi Moroccan; in what sense is she a Moroccan filmmaker; in what sense is she representing and in what sense is she attacking Morocco? Merrakshi's identity shifts and her personal narrative (her own diaspora) enabled her to capture the "means of representation" and create an art of defiance where identity does not have to be coherent. While the film's conservative critics assume that Moroccan identity is a fixed signifier, and that the society of control appropriates and regulates each new identity, the points of convergence between different cultures in the film challenges the hegemonic definitions of identity as coherent and integrated. Merrakshi's personal story embodies the many paradoxes of living the diaspora, and her narrative challenges traditions and creates controversy. But while her atypical narrative challenges Morocco's traditional politics, her film remains complicit with the hegemony of globalization.

The censorship efforts against Merrakshi's film reflect the mindset of Moroccan conservatives, who have a vested and clearly articulated stake in preserving the moral and cultural foundations of Morocco, and ensuring the respect that is deemed necessary to Moroccans. The Moroccan critics who would ban the film are worried not just about what is "bad" but also about what is pleasurable, and therefore a temptation away from the locally known and endorsed values. A governmental ban on the film has prompted the circulation of black market copies and spurred commentary on the Internet. What drives the controversy surrounding the film is not just Merrakshi's revealing the female protagonist's experience, her youth or her gender, but her unabashed sexuality. The uncontrolled female sexuality that fuels the controversy surrounding this female director, however, is spurred by Moroccan consumer culture. While Merrakshi's film foregrounds female sexuality to a public that had previously repressed it, it also reinforces stereotyped notions of female sexuality. The female director tries to break old taboos, but she paradoxically reinforces the very same essentialized notions of female sexuality that her critics uphold, and thus deprives women of the chance to construct an identity free from stereotypical notions of sexuality. The public consumption of female sexuality is witnessed first-hand in the stir the film has caused. Merrakshi's construction of her female protagonist relies on notions bor-

rowed from a consumerist, global culture that positions the woman as spectacle.

In his essay "Marock in Morocco: Reading Moroccan Films in the Age of Circulation,"⁹ Brian Edwards has studied the possibilities of globalization by tracing the global cultural power of *Marock*. In discussing Merrakshi's cultural choices, Edwards draws on Lee and LiPuma's meditation on "Cultures of circulation" to argue about the circulation of American cultural products within the film and assumes that the Hollywood product is the dominant narrative that must be considered in any study of national cinema. Because American movies have been so influential and innovative for so many decades, exported films are seen, discussed, and imitated. The Hollywood pattern has become generic and is imitated in other countries too. Brian Edwards describes *Marock* as a Hollywood teen flic, not like a French film or like a Bollywood film. Edwards approaches the film from a global perspective to a global and English-literate reader whose assumptions he may be revealing and expanding; his essay would be understood as readily in Australia or Toronto as in London or Johannesburg or Chicago.

The title *Marock* is a play on the French name of Morocco Maroc and Rock. Merrakshi explains the choice of the title thus: "J'ai justement choisi le titre Marock... pour rendre compte des paradoxes d'une jeunesse partagée entre la tradition du Maroc ancien et certaines aspirations plus rock'n'roll" [I have chosen this title to account for the paradoxes of a youth culture that is divided between the traditions of an ancient Morocco and aspirations such as rock'n'roll.]¹⁰ *Marock* shows how the Moroccan elite aspires to a global culture, and thus highlights the dramatic differences between Morocco's elite circles and the majority of its poor population. The film depicts the culture of Casablanca's privileged youth, and thus dramatizes the different forms of subjectivity that comprise youth subcultures in Morocco. These youth, moreover, are not "typical" of the entire society, with its gap between rich and poor, since they are privileged. And they are not men and women; they are adolescents who are just beginning to "come of age" in terms of the maturation that is required for their status in an evolving culture. The t-shirts the adolescents are wearing have logos from global corporations and universities in other countries. The film makes mention of "Trump," and there is also a reference to "textiles and exports." These adolescents can afford to show off their flowing hair, their skin, and clothes, because they are protected by their own privilege. The adolescents' motto could be "If you've got it, you might as well flaunt it," and "Do you know who my father is?" They trade on that protection without feeling obliged to deserve it. Through its depiction of these youth, the film reveals new Moroccan consumerist practices and the role of youth as ultimate consumers. Both Rita and her Jewish friend Yuri attend a secular school, apparently for no reason other than to acquire credentials. They appear to have no motivation beyond earning a required high school degree. In one classroom scene, the teacher is lecturing about Spinoza—an excommunicated secular Jew. The film implies that in spite of their different religious affiliations, Rita and Yuri can bond (along with their friends) in the secular sensuality of affluent popular culture.

The filmmaker uses sexuality and romantic desire as an allegory for a Morocco that is under the economic and social forces of globalization. The film came about at a time of great transition.

Morocco's liberalization trend, under King Mohammed VI, and increased interaction with the rest of the world have influenced the way Moroccans see themselves and the world. The dominant cultural narrative has shifted to the consumer department stores in cosmopolitan spaces. This shift reveals how Moroccan national identity is bound to the global economy and a Western consumerist culture that commodifies women's sexuality. Part of the controversy that lies behind Merrakshi is how her film, more than those of other Moroccan female directors, is about exposure.¹¹ The film reveals how a young female protagonist thinks, including her desires and frustrations. Such exposure coincides with the commercialization of the images of women. The mise-en-scènes of Rita and Yuri's sexual encounters and the sexually provocative covers of magazines such as *Telquel*¹², revealing images from the film of Rita's half-naked body, cater to the hungry gaze of the public, thus rendering Rita an object of voyeurism. Because it films against the taboos of the old days, the film also has become readily marketable.

In addition to appealing to the Moroccan public consumption of sexuality, the film also uses sexuality to engage with Western consumer markets in which mass forms like the Hollywood love story is the dominant player. The film's ironies arise from the conundrum of using film as a form of rebellion against traditional values when the production of cinema imposes its own forms of hegemony through globalization, sometimes in the form of the Hollywood "aesthetic." Global cinema has entered a sphere of consumerism, where personal expression may suffer due to the expectations of a capitalist production for the masses. The filmmaker's focus on romantic desire creates a story of boundary-crossing lovers whose struggle to come together across the borders of religion and culture becomes a way of testing and perhaps relocating boundaries. As the love relationship unfolds, Rita and Yuri's lust is transformed into true love as Rita begins to care for Yuri. In one scene, Rita protests Yuri's recklessness with drinking and speeding. He is also glad that she received her degree even though he could not hug her as others around were hugging, because she was standing with her mother. But in the car, when they kiss, while it is all precocious Romeo-and-Juliet, their love becomes also a greater reality outside the limits of society and more promise for the future. The car is not just a means of transportation, or thrills of speed, racing, conquest, and flight; it is a private space in which their relationship develops. The camera pans the sea and the sky and the viewer sees the two bathing in the waves. They sit side by side in the car facing the sea; they look at each other and out to sea, and they are happy. The viewer has to make his/her own guesses as to what the director might be trying to express here—is she deliberately trying to get outside of the narrative, is it an awareness that "desire is tied to imperialism" and so she is trying to imagine a space apart? Or is it a way to make the viewer feel for the lovers?

The music in the scene and the long camera shots suggest a utopian space for the two lovers. The use of montage and the collage of the different scenes to show multi-layered spaces show the director doing something avant-garde with the narrative. Montage in the film also serves as a sign of a new space in construction. Rita suggests that they journey to Paris, where they do not have to hide their relationship and where they can even live together. Yuri is worried that Rita's parents will be upset about their departure:

Rita : Je voudrais tellement que tu viennes à Paris, toi aussi... On n'aurait pas besoin de se cacher... On pourrait se voir tous les jours. On Pourrait meme habiter ensemble...

Yuri: Qu'est-ce qu'ils diront tes parents?

Rita: on s'en fout, on sera loin d'ici...

Yuri: Ce n'est pas si simple que ça...

Rita: Si on le veut vraiment, ça pourrait d'être... On n'en a rien a foutre de ce que pensent les autres!

(Rita: I would really like you to come to Paris... There we would not need to hide. We could see each other every day. We could even live together.

Yuri: What would your parents say?

Rita: I do not care. We will be far away from here.

Yuri: It is not as simple as you think

Rita: If we really want to, it could happen. We should not worry about what others would think.)

Whereas the viewer had judged them not serious; now there is a sense of innocence, that the good-hearted servant-woman, Mina, understands when, bathing Rita in the water of an enclosed tub, she proclaims affectionately "*Dieu te protège*" [May God protect you].

When Yuri unclasps the chain and puts it around Rita's neck, the viewer sees him honorably "plighting his troth" as he would be doing if he were to place a ring on Rita's finger. Accepting to wear his gift, Rita lets him know that what the world would construe as a barrier is not important for what exists between them. They make love against the "rules" and over adult opposition, and the attitude of the servants, themselves religious adherents. Lahsen protests "*mais il est un juif*" (But he is a Jew), and Mina has counseled "*When the bee has taken the nectar he flies away*" and "*Que dieu la protège*" (May God protect her). These believers, however, are loving, supportive, affectionate, unlike the believer-brother who for all his attractiveness and all his righteousness is rigorous, dominating, and something of a killjoy. Even without witnesses, Rita and Yuri accept each other and become a couple. Law can legitimate and religion can sanctify, but young as they are, they can accept each other. An audience that in effect substitutes for witnesses can have many opinions about such a "love story," but no one can deny that love happens.

The question is: what possibilities does love open for practical formulations of contact between cultural groups in Morocco? As feminist theoretical views about love indicate, from Chela Sandoval's theorizing of love as the impetus of tactical coalition,¹³ to Kaja Silverman's use of love as a new model for identification based on difference,¹⁴ there is a shared attempt among Western feminists to envision new ethical models of coalition in the face of the divisive forces of imperialist globalism. However, in foregrounding love as a model of contact, the film does not disconnect itself from power relations. As Edward Said, Robert Young, and Anne McIntock have pointed out, desire itself is intimately tied to forces of imperialism, globalization and consumer culture.

The film puts love in dialogue with globalization in a way that highlights sexuality and desire in the age of globalization. The filmmaker highlights love across religious and national boundaries to show the complex ways in which the private and

the increasingly globalized public depend on one another. The adolescents' ideas about love are in fact imported along with other commodities from the West. In his book *Mensonge Romantique Et Verite Romanesque* Rene Girard argues that love is based on triangular relationship between subject, object and model.¹⁵ According to Girard, desire is awakened not by the object of desire but by the revered "other:" Mimetic desire lies neither in the subject nor in the object but in a model imitated by the subject.

Girard's concept of the triangular relationship between subject, object and model is relevant to Rita and Yuri's western ideas about love. Love is also redemptive as it has caused Rita's transformation and has humanized and matured her first for joy, then for woe, suffering, and empathy. Yuri dies in a car accident and the viewer has to wonder about whatever made him drive like a maniac when he had, as could be said, "prospects"? Was it being in a hurry to reach a social scene about which he felt ambivalent because among the dominantly Muslim peer-group he was not free to propose marriage? Did he fear rejection not only from the Muslim group but also from "his own group"? At the funeral scene, the film captures Rita's anguish, especially when she embraces the fellow who had loved her, whom she had rejected, and who we see now feeling her pain. These scenes force reinterpretation of the previous scenes. The camera pans the city's skyline, its high-rise apartment complexes and commercial sections that have been there all along but were unseen by the privileged oblivious young. Even though Yuri was not practicing Judaism, the viewer eventually sees that as a Jew he will be mourned mainly (though not only) by the Jewish community. The service is the domain of men—since Rita is doubly excluded—and Yuri will be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Separate cemeteries, like separate rites, are traditional and conventional. The rites are presented as denominationally exclusive, but binding those who participate.

Marock, though it is played up as a "love story between a Moslem woman and a Jewish man," does not explore the implications of intermarriage for a future generation because it is essentially Rita's story. The film, which turns out to be a female *Bildungsroman*, is the story of how a girl becomes a woman. The film ends not with loss but with the promise of loss redeemed. Rita has to leave the scene of her pain and the frivolities that no longer appeal to her. She could not love any of the boys in the crowd she used to associate with, though she accepted comfort from one, himself grief-stricken. Rita had to go away before she could come back, and by leaving she gave up a familiar scene, sensual comfort and pleasures, and constant intolerable reminder of loss. She would gain integrity, at least, and touchstone memories on which to base further education and adventures.

In the airport scene during her departure to Paris, Rita appears sobered and wearing black. The scene depicts her last snack with the school-friends, and a tremulous parting from her closest girlfriends. At the start of the film, Rita rudely defies the police officer who asks to see her papers; at the end, however, while asked for her papers at the airport, she shows her passport. Has she recognized that rejection of some authorities will leave her subservient to other authorities? Now that she complies with the rules, she is no more impetuous, willful and nasty. Rita's conception of rights and obligations seems to have evolved, and unstated political implications could be drawn out.

Marock as cinema can be analyzed in terms of viewer-

response theory. A first viewing of the film reveals a protagonist who is only interested in sex and cigarettes; a second reading shows that the film in fact overturns the conventions of consumerist culture and becomes pro-spiritual. Still Merrakshi is viewed by her Moroccan critics as the modern film director who has overstepped social norms. The criticisms of Merrakshi that appeared in countless Moroccan forums and discussions attest to the fact that her film is causing a social stir. Her depictions of a sexually active female protagonist overturn decades of repression of female sexuality in Morocco. One can argue that the "sexual revolution" this woman director has started has indeed shaken the country. Yet just as much as Merrakshi pushes the limits of socially acceptable norms, she is complicit with the commercial forces that objectify women. Merrakshi is also capitalizing on the forces of globalization to promote herself and her film. Cyberspace and the internet is where she is currently diffusing her film *Marock*. The film is not only controversial; it is, finally, absorbing.

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Notes

- 1 I am grateful to my colleague Blossom Kirschenbaum for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this paper.
- 2 The post-independence period from 1961, when King Hassan II succeeded his father, Mohammed V, to 1991 was known in Morocco as the "black years" or "lead years"—for the lead bullets fired. During this time, calls for greater individual rights were met with harsh crackdowns, and the filmmakers' activities were under constant surveillance.
- 3 Merrakshi, Leila. *Marock* (2005) (105 min). France and Morocco.
- 4 In his essay, "Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre," Hamid Naficy stresses the importance of the "exile, émigré, refugee, and expatriate" in the production of the transnational film. Naficy labels the films made by postcolonial filmmakers living in the West "accented." Their different accent, according to him, stems from their stylistic variety, different modes of production and cultural diversity. Naficy argues that "accented" filmmakers like Merrakshi are the products of the postcolonial diaspora, for it was due to their displacement that they dared to speak and capture the means of representation. He further points out that postcolonial filmmakers like Merrakshi have over the past thirty years produced transnational films that, though perhaps marginalized in Morocco, "allegorize" the culture of the home country. Refer to Naficy, Hamid. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton UP, 2001).
- 5 Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Back Bay Press, 2001).
- 6 "The Marock Debate." 2006. <<http://riadzany.blogspot.com/2006/01/marock-debate.html>> (accessed Sept 1, 2008).
- 7 "The Marock Debate."
- 8 "The Marock Debate."
- 9 Edward, Brian, "Marock in Morocco: Reading Moroccan Films in the Age of Circulation," *Journal of North African Studies* 12 (2007): 287-307.
- 10 Boukhari, Karim. "Marock: Le Film de Tous Les Tabous," *Telquel* 223, May, 2005.
- 11 The notion of exposure both as object and as a mode of representation has been explored in a collection of essays, Banks, Kathryn and Joseph Harris. *Exposure: Revealing Bodies, Unveiling Representations*. (Oxford: P. Lang, 2004).
- 12 The front cover of the Moroccan magazine *Telquel*, few weeks after the film was released, featured Rita in a bikini looking down at her brother who was prostrating in Muslim prayer.
- 13 Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
- 14 Silverman, Kaja. *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
- 15 Rene Girard. *Mensonge Romantique Et Verite Romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961).

Original Visions

FEMALE DIRECTORS IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE CINEMA

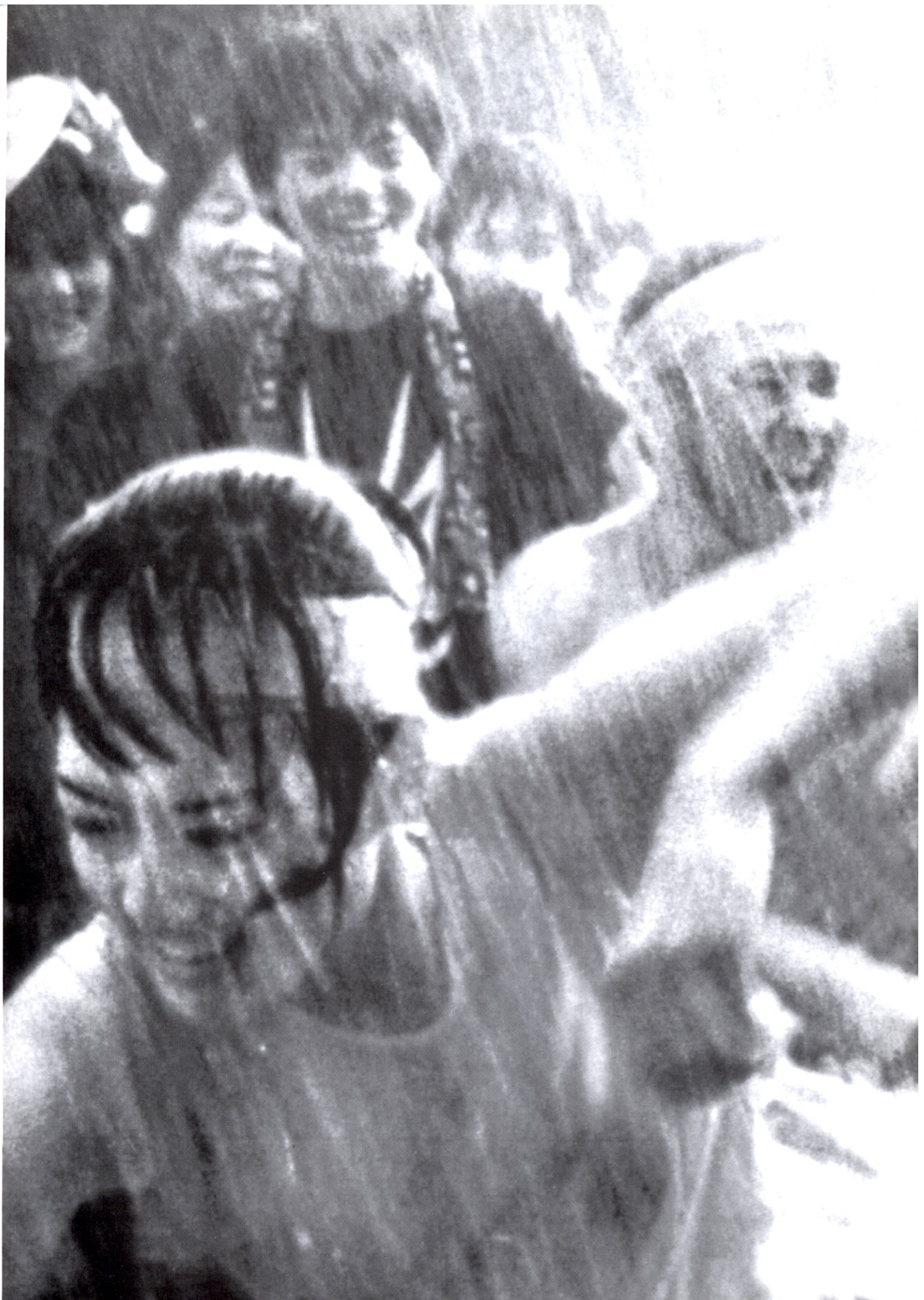
by ADAM BINGHAM

In his landmark study of the Japanese *nuberu bagu* (*nouvelle vague*), David Desser quotes from an interview with actress Hidari Sachiko, who told Joan Mellen: 'if you want to say something about Japan, you have to focus on women,'¹ something Desser underlines with his own observation that: 'a focus on women can reveal most of Japan's inner tensions and contradictions.'² These are statements that would seem to have an inherent validity when one considers the number of notable Japanese directors to have built their cinema around images of Japanese womanhood, who have repeatedly shaped their narratives around, and drawn their thematic preoccupations from, female figures and their socio-historical fate in Japan; who, indeed, have been described and celebrated by some commentators as *feminisuto* (feminist) filmmakers.

This is true of the new wave (Yoshida Kiju, Imamura Shohei) and the golden age of Japanese cinema in the post-war years (Mizoguchi, Naruse, Kinoshita, Toyoda Shiro). It is true of the 1930s (Shimizu Hiroshi, Goshō Heinosuke) and the 1990s and thereafter (Kore'eda Hirokazu, Nakashima Tetsuya, Ogata Akira). It is also true of certain genres that have historically achieved prominence in Japanese filmmaking: from silent *Gendai-geki* and classical *Haha mono* ('Mother films'), to the so-called 'Pinky violence' Yakuza films, and on into the modern J-horror boom and a return to prevalence of the home-drama by such directors as the late Ichikawa Jun, Kurosawa Kiyoshi and Toyoda Toshiaki. This plethora of filmic images of Japanese womanhood, combined with the crystallization in the 1920s and increasingly thereafter of modern 'women's literature' would thus seem to underline Hidari's contention that this particularly turbulent century in Japan's history has been captured through and reflected in narratives centred on female protagonists.

Whatever the truth about the claims of feminism made for such films and filmmakers, particularly Mizoguchi (and it should be noted that this has been disputed by as many as have advocated it), it is nonetheless true that films about women have predominated throughout Japanese cinema, about women but made by men. Whatever their respective insights or attitudes, the fact remained that women in Japanese films were almost always created, and certainly looked at, by men. They were not looked at in a way informed by the Mulvian model of power, desire and the objectifying gaze ('to be looked at-ness'). Rather, they frequently reverted almost by default to images and symbols of femininity and womanhood as opposed to simply **being** feminine, **being** women. That is, they reverted to well worn, culturally-pervasive clichés, to types of the kind essayed by Ian Buruma in his book *A Japanese Mirror*³ (the self-sacrificing heroine, the demon woman, the embattled survivor, etc). Thus one can easily recognise a Mizoguchi or an Imamura film because of the explicit types they employ, and the

Shara (2003), Kawase Naomi





The director Kawase Naomi (left)

role of these types in shaping and conditioning their particular narratives.

In modern Japanese cinema, images of and stories about women and womanhood (including many teenage dramas) continue to proliferate, as a recent Japan Foundation UK touring programme entitled *Girls on Film* amply attests. Indeed, at a symposium in 2009 it was estimated by producer Kito Yuki that 70% of filmgoers in Japan are female, and that the subservient roles often taken by women in the Japanese film industry (working at such jobs as script continuity), coupled with their domination of the fields of production and marketing, make it logical that this country should see more women directors. And in the current climate, so it has. However, unlike, say, Iranian cinema, one couldn't exactly say that this situation has undergone a marked and progressive transformation in terms of the politics of representation. Indeed, the (mostly young) female filmmakers who have come to prominence in the last fifteen years have not been overly concerned with providing portraits of 'women' and 'womanhood' per se. Indeed, the work of a number of the most prominent modern female Japanese directors is marked as much by concerns and explorations of masculinity as of femininity.

This is true of Nishikawa Miwa, who even in the multi-director portmanteau film *Fimeiru* (*Female*, 2005), which aims to be an examination of modern womanhood, gender and sexuality, focuses her short film on a ten year-old boy and his erotic obsession with a much older woman. It is also true of Tanada

Yuki, whose explorations of femininity in her youth film dramas are almost always gauged by and against their effect on a male narrative counterpart, whose consciousness usually anchors the story.⁴ Furthermore, in what can be taken as a positive rather than a regressive fact, there are a number of female directors who, like Kathryn Bigelow or Mimi Leder in the US, have staked their claim to popular genre cinema. Directors such as Asato Mari (*Dokuritsu Shōjo gurentai* (*Samurai Chicks*, 2004), *Ju on: Kuroi Shōjo* (*Ju-On: Girl in Black* (2009)) and Sato Shimako (The Eko Eko Azaraku series) have worked exclusively in populist genre cinema, typically J-horror, and have proved themselves working at the forefront of the commercial industry.

Thus, irrespective of their subjects, the number of female directors working in Japan has increased dramatically, and several interesting filmmakers have emerged who are more than worthy of recognition. Their work is of interest precisely because they do not use women in the way Mizoguchi or Imamura did, and in so differing they offer a variant model that demonstrates the extent to which Japanese filmmaking has changed and developed over time; and how, beside contemporary male images of women, those images offered by women tell a different story, the more interesting for not being overtly linked with, and limited to, questions of feminism and femininity.

Chief in this regard is undoubtedly the already internationally canonised Kawase Naomi, documentary and latterly feature film director whose images of women, beginning in her poetic short home movies of her beloved grandmother, are direct,



The God Suzaku (1997), Kawase Naomi

complex, frequently contradictory and certainly openly challenging. They are often marked by conflicting perspectives and attitudes, foregrounding and problematizing the act of looking and the process of documentation. Again and again in her early discursive work—especially *Katatsumori* (1994) and *Ten Mitake* (*See Heaven*, 1995)—Kawase trains the camera on her grandmother Una whilst she is going about her domestic chores of cooking, cleaning and gardening. She literally pushes its lens into her face, and leaves it there beyond any sense of simply capturing a moment in time; instead demonstrating the extent to which a camera alters rather than records ‘reality’. That is, how it narrates into being as opposed to subserviently crystallizing a pre-existing world and character.

In her final so-called ‘granny’ film, the astonishing *Birth/Mother* (1999) Kawase begins increasingly to probe and berate Una, to ask her questions about what transpires is a fractured, troubled family life. In a precise correlative, she concomitantly examines her grandmother from a visual perspective, in particular her body. The film begins with Una in the bath, and in a *mise-en-scène* that has been likened to the painter Lucien Freud, Kawase examines her naked form, seeming at once both to caress the aged folds of her skin and to invade her space and exploit her nudity, her immense vulnerability. It is a startling work that recalls the early documentaries of Hara Kazuo in opening up an intensely private spectacle for public consumption, and in so doing challenging the audience to make up their own mind on what they are seeing and to judge accordingly.

Birth/Mother was a French co-production and remains the most difficult to see of Kawase’s documentaries. However, as with her comparable factual portrait *Tsuoku no dansu* (*Letter from a Yellow Cherry Blossom*, 2003), which records the final stages of a famous poet’s terminal illness, it is a challenge well worth accepting should the occasion arise.

In her features, beginning with the Camera d’Or-winning *Moe no suzaku* (*The God Suzaku*, 1997), Kawase tends to focus on fractured families in small, rural villages, in this case her own home region of Nara. Building on her discursive work, she augments what are generally slight, episodic narratives with a rigorous and detailed emphasis on the rhythms and rituals that define the lives of those in these remote communities. As such, just as her ‘documentaries’ complicate and rupture their form with implicitly conflicting textual paradigms, so in her features both fictive and documentary modes conflate and intersperse. This then tends to figure as a stylistic correlative to narratives that are themselves predicated on prominent dichotomies and structural antinomies: between tradition and modernity, old and young, faith, superstition and practicality, urban and rural. This is taken even further in Kawase’s second feature *Shara so-ju* (*Shara*, 2003), in which there is a fault-line between past and present in a story that revolves around the unexplained disappearance of a young boy and its effect on the community at large.

Beside Kawase, perhaps the most prominent young female Japanese director is the aforementioned Nishikawa Miwa, who began her directorial career aged 29 after working as an

assistant to Kore'eda Hirokazu (who has served as producer on her films). Over the course of only three features (in addition to the aforementioned segment of *Female*, and a short for the anthology of Sŷseki Natsume adaptations *Yume ju-ya* (*Ten Nights of Dreams*, 2006)), she has developed a remarkably cohesive and compact vision and narrative sensibility. Her debut, *Hebi ichigo* (*Wild Berries*, 2003) and its feature follow-up *Yureru* (*Sway*, 2006) both concern estranged sons returning to the family home to mourn a parent, and subsequently raising old problems, tensions and resentments that run like fault lines through their tenuous familial units. These films, particularly *Sway*, subtly explore the make-up of modern Japan, and this they do through images of the family and the rural environment as contrasted with the urban milieu associated with their respective prodigal sons.

A central concern of both works is the extent to which masculine identity is predicated on women and femininity. The schematically juxtaposed brothers in *Sway* (young fashion photographer and shy country bumpkin petrol station attendant) are largely defined against a young girl whom the latter idolizes and wishes to marry, and with whom the former has a largely (for him) inconsequential one night stand. Similarly, an aged, infirm patriarch in *Wild Berries* is cared for exclusively by his daughter-in-law, to her increasing desperation. At the same time, her husband continues to hide the fact that he is unemployed from his family, and thus out of personal shame mistreats his wife when he is at home with her.

Furthermore, in addition to the obvious comparisons with older directors of the *Shomin-geki* modern life drama to focus on the family (Ozu, Naruse, Heinosuke Goshi), the spectre of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* hangs over *Sway*, as the film becomes a courtroom drama that hinges on contrasting and contrastive points of view regarding a possible murder. The protagonist is a young Tokyo-based photographer named Takeru, who, upon returning home for the anniversary of his mother's death, meets an old flame called Cheiko who now works with his brother. The brother, Minoru, has romantic designs on Chieko, but on a trip into the country an incident on a bridge leads to the girl's death, and thereafter Minoru is charged with her murder. His guilt or innocence then hinges on what his brother saw of the incident—or, more properly, how he both remembers and interprets what he saw. It is a film that complicates its generic storyline's search for the truth with an increasing morass of feelings and emotions that break through to the surface and ultimately make such an inviolable certainty both impossible and redundant. It is, ultimately, what events mean to the characters rather than the events themselves that take centre stage.

Another fledgling auteur is the remarkable Iguchi Nami, whose work has yet to achieve any significant international distribution. Although she has thus far only completed two features—*Inuneko* (*The Cat Leaves Home*, 2004) and *Hito no sekkusu o warau na* (*Don't Laugh at my Romance*, 2007)—she has already evinced what one may well define as a mature style, a visual lexicon and narrative methodology one would expect to have gradually evolved and been refined over a significant body of work. Employing mostly static, observational long takes and long shots, Iguchi's work thus far establishes a marked dialectic between style and genre, the contemplative detachment inherent in the visuals throwing into relief the generic storylines, deforming and modulating them to the extent that they begin to work against themselves as signifying practices.

The intrinsic norms of Iguchi's visuals have (unsurprisingly, lazily) led a number of commentators to compare her work with that of Ozu. However, leaving aside the static cinematography, the contrast does not really hold up. A much more apposite juxtaposition would be with Hou Hsiao-hsien, or especially with Tsai Ming-liang, her gracefully observational extended takes capturing a temporality that owes comparatively little to narratively salient action and much to elucidating a particular thematic preoccupation, one that reconfigures the typically naturalistic *mise-en-scène* as a theatrical space (replete with the proscenium implicit in the camera's perspective). This figuratively transforms the characters into actors, into figurative performers who act out their own meta-narratives that, informed by their particular dreams and desires, then become akin to a genre film, an enjoyably predictable tale they narrate to themselves in lieu of the complications of 'real' life.

The Japanese title of Iguchi's award-winning debut⁵, *The Cat Leaves Home* translates directly as *Dog, Cat*, which is rather more apt in reflecting a story of two professedly opposite young women who find themselves sharing both the same apartment and the same man. Its dramatic focus on romance and coming of age was repeated in her follow up *Don't Laugh at my Romance*, albeit to ostensibly more ambitious effect. As in Iwai Shunji's masterful teen romance *Hana to Arisu* (*Hana and Alice*, 2004), which Iguchi's film in many ways resembles, even sharing a lead actress in the shape of Aoi Yu, this film's slight storyline (involving an affair between a middle-aged school teacher and a pupil) is drawn out to over two and a quarter hours. Such an ostensibly disproportionate running time then forms the locus of the aforementioned dialectic, inclusive as it is of a number of extended scenes that simply depict the characters being together over and above any significant narrative information that is relayed. In particular, a protracted comedic scene featuring the teacher and her young lover attempting to erect a tent in the former's art studio offers no information or development of significance to the plot. It thus has little to do with moving the story forward, and everything to do with the time away from the world, and away from the story, that these transgressive lovers can spend together and be themselves rather than having to wear the masks and having to perform as they do in public.

As I noted at the beginning of this feature, *Seishun eiga* (youth films) have proliferated in recent years in Japanese cinema, and along with Iguchi a number of young female directors have worked well within this form. One of the best examples of this sub-genre is *Harufuei* (*Halfway*, 2009), co-written by Iwai Shunji and directed by Kitagawa Erico. Revolving entirely around a fledgling teen relationship and the turmoil caused by the boy's potential move away to a Tokyo university, *Halfway* may be regarded as something of a companion piece to Iguchi's *Don't Laugh at my Romance*. In place of that film's extended, static, largely interior-set takes, Kitagawa's handheld DV aesthetic remains continually mobile, almost perpetually reframing the action and charting its expansive unfolding in natural landscapes whose seasonal specificity (autumn) impacts greatly on the thematic core of the film (that is, it is a time of year marked by change and transition, and this matches the characters' lives caught in a comparable transience and instability: between school and university, youth and adulthood, being alone or remaining together).

Similarly, the narrative of *Halfway* may be contrasted with

those of Iguchi. In contradistinction to her elongation of time as a means of overtly framing a generic story, Iwai and Kitagawa's film compresses and compacts its temporality, feeling as a result something akin to an extended montage in which the couple's time together is summarised, held for a brief moment before it vanishes and passes into memory. Indeed, the young girl who remains the central character throughout the film frequently takes photographs in order to capture certain moments as an epoch of her life comes to an end; and the structure of the narrative as a whole works along similar lines. There is little glue to hold these scenes between the young couple together, little sense of drama other than that which they directly bring to bear on themselves and their own lives, nothing prescribed or imposed. And a number of scenes thus have a dual sense of being recollected even as they are taking place, as though a narrative scrapbook were being revisited and old memories and snapshots in time opened up. This, contrasted with the immediacy of Kitagawa's handheld DV camera (which in its constant movement seems literally to be chasing ephemeral, vanishing moments as they flutter away on the autumn breeze) gives *Halfway* a singular tone and sensibility beyond any comparable film I've seen by a male director. Truly, this generic terrain is one that has been claimed most fervently and successfully by female directors in Japan.

If images of teenage males and females occupy a central role in the work of modern young Japanese directors, it seems fitting to close with a filmmaker who has, of late, been concerned with pictures of women in middle-age. One of the most popular films in the aforementioned Japan Foundation *Girls on Film* programme was *Kamome Shokudo* (*Kamome Diner*, 2006), a film about two Japanese women running a diner in Helsinki, Finland. Its writer/director, Oigigami Naoko, had begun her career with a horror short entitled *Ayako* in 1999. But when she progressed to feature filmmaking five years later she migrated to light, gentle feel-good and quirky drama/comedies, and this genre has defined her oeuvre in the five films she has made since (a new film is due later in 2010). Oigigami's focus has tended to reside in and around isolated, enclosed, seemingly hermetic environments into which strangers arrive, their problematic and fractious assimilation into this milieu then forming the thematic heart of the narrative.

Oigigami's feature debut, *Barber Yoshino* (*Yoshino's Barber Shop*, 2004), is set in a little village where the titular hairdresser is responsible for the same style being given to every local boy, until a newcomer complicates tradition by refusing to comply. Similarly, the action in *Kamome Diner* is set largely in the eatery of the title, whilst even more enclosed is the setting of her most recent work, *Megane* (*Glasses*, 2007), which takes place in a small, isolated beachfront guest house on a remote island. Indeed, *Glasses* seems to be the film toward which Oigigami's previous features had been pointing, the refined apex towards which they had been almost systematically working.

The film follows a middle-aged female protagonist who arrives at said guest house, and is initially perturbed by its quaint customs and the perceived eccentricities of its owners. However, she gradually warms to its secluded, relaxed magic, and ultimately becomes one with the place and people, gradually learning to truly see them without the previous preconceptions that she brought with her from her life. It is in this that the true import of the title can be found: it is a film about looking and truly seeing, and the significance of glasses (worn by all the

major characters) resides in the aid they offer for those with impaired vision, those who (literally and, here, figuratively) cannot see.

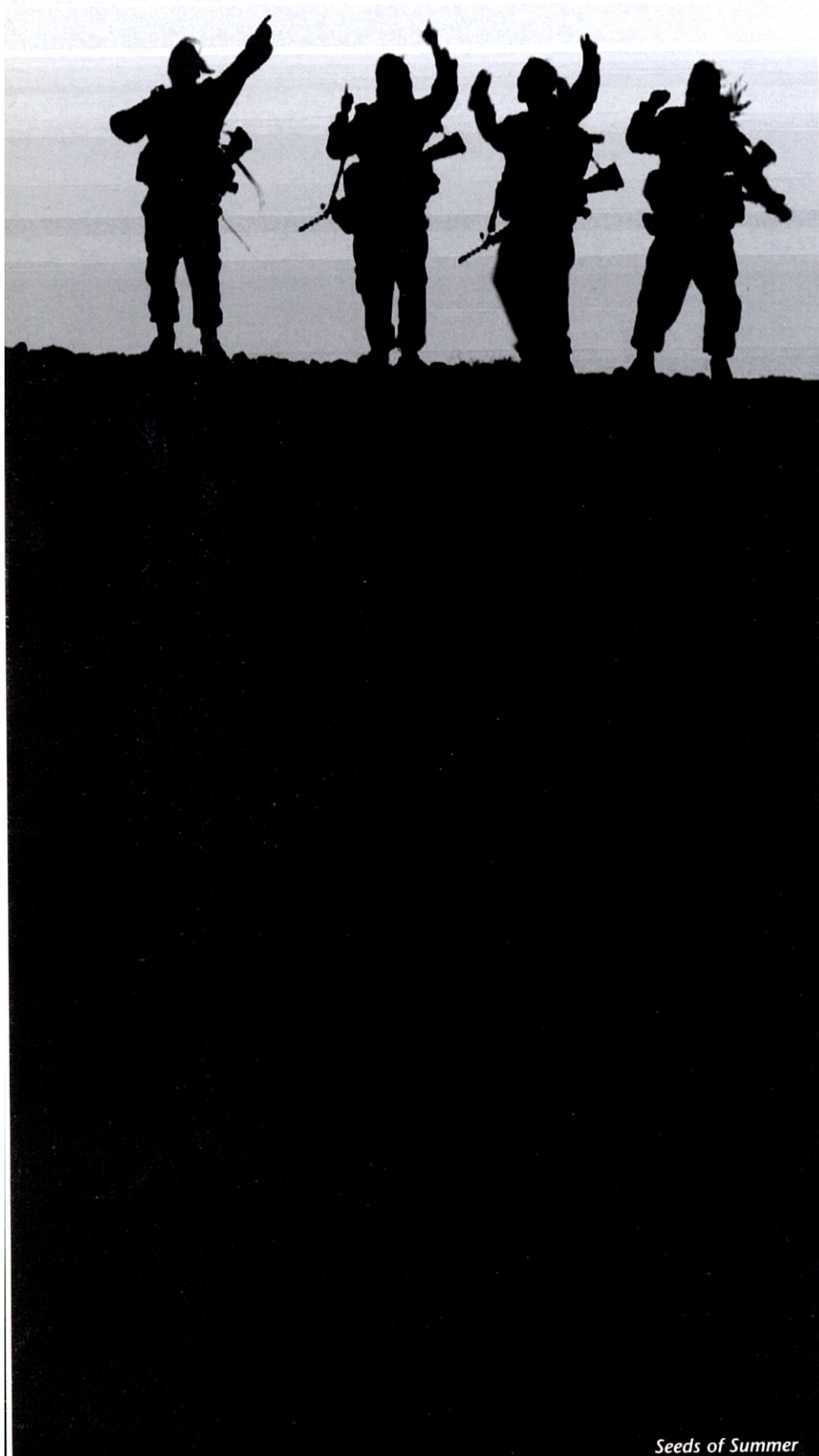
In *Glasses*, Oigigami pairs her narrative down even more than in her previous works. There is very little action away from the guest house and its immediate environs, and moreover the writer/director boldly refuses to offer any exposition about the troubled protagonist. We never learn the precise reason for her flight to this island, nor why one of her students (through whom we learn that she is a teacher) follows her there. All we discover of her comes from her actions and behaviour in the present tense of the film's narrative, and her gradual assimilation into the group at the guest house comes from shedding the baggage with which she has arrived on the island, much as Oigigami incrementally sheds narrative weight and hones the focus down to only the beach itself. Just as in *Kamome Diner*, this group, this figurative family (there is an older and a younger woman completing a multi-generational picture), then becomes redolent of an idealized unit to offset the traditional strictures of Japanese society in which the family or workplace - that is, the groups one does not as readily choose - offer traditional facilitation for collective identity. It is a generic, predictable point, perhaps, but as an image of middle-aged womanhood predicated entirely on choice and agency, of self-definition that is not reactive, it should be cherished.

There is in Oigigami, as in Iguchi and Nishikawa, an admirably tacit refusal to make any sweeping, grand statements about 'women' and womanhood; and indeed to thus use their protagonists in order to make points about Japan of the kind discussed by Hidari Sachiko. However, the best among them do offer resonant stories that quietly, subtly delineate a vision of Japan; or at least a vision of Japanese cinema, as progressive directors such as Kitagawa and her use of DV suggest there are female filmmakers working at the forefront of developments within the industry. Considered in addition to populist directors like Asato Mari, the picture currently appears one of healthy depth and diversity. And with the continuing vitality of Kawase, Iguchi, et al, who seem determined to plough their own turf, continue on their own distinctive path, this look set to continue. One can only hope.

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Notes

- 1 Quoted in Desser, D *Eros plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988) p.108.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Buruma, I *A Japanese Mirror: Heroes and Villains in Japanese Culture* (Jonathan Cape Ltd, Great Britain, 1984) pp.18-63.
- 4 Tanada is a filmmaker who more than many of her female contemporaries explicitly contrasts male and female, especially with regard to youthful burgeoning sexuality and the vicissitudes of innocence and experience. Her teen drama *Oretachi ni asu wa naissu* (*Ain't no Tomorrows*, 2008) - which like *Halfway* explicitly locates its drama among pupils who are just finishing school - juxtaposes two sets of boys and girls and their respective attitudes to sex. Similarly, her debut, *Tsuki to cherry* (*Moon and Cherry*, 2004) satirizes female empowerment and narrative agency by focusing on a young female writer who uses her sexual exploits with men as research for her stories, and in the process deeply affects the feelings of one of her hitherto virginal subjects.
- 5 *The Cat Leaves Home* was awarded the coveted Fipresci prize in Torino, Italy, in 2004.



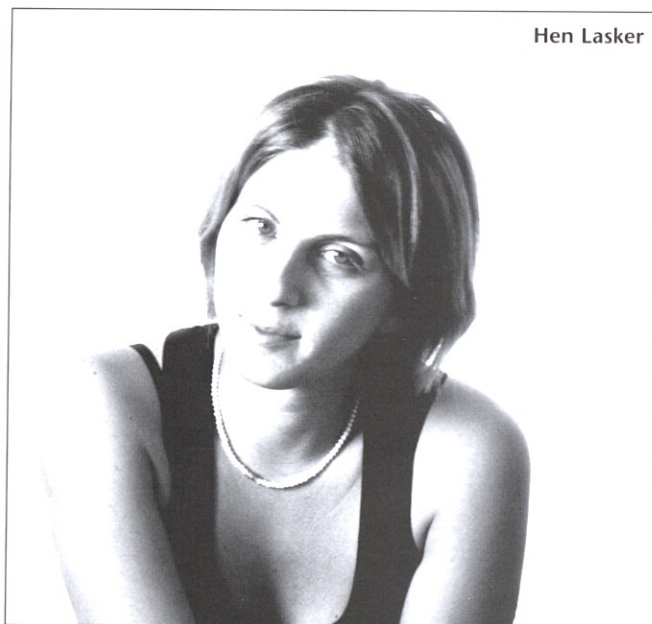
Seeds of Summer

BY MARIA SAN FILIPPO

Seeds of Summer (2007), the debut feature of Tel Aviv-based filmmaker Hen Lasker, documents girls' combat training for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the intensive course of instruction and preparation following every Israeli citizen's conscription at age 18. In the tradition of participatory documentary filmmaking, Lasker lived among the girls she was filming for 66 days and nights—an immersion that would not have been accessible to a male filmmaker, making this a necessarily woman-directed film. As an Israeli citizen (born in 1980), Lasker goes a step further in exceeding the outsider's perspective of *Harlan County USA* or *Born into Brothels* by returning to the site where she first fell in love, seven years earlier, with one of her fellow commanders—a woman. "To this day my mother thinks that if I hadn't served here, it never would have happened," acknowledges Lasker, and though worded ambiguously her meaning is clear: Lasker owes her lesbianism to the Israeli army.

The provocation this presents to our idea of not just the military but all gender-segregated institutions is encouraged from the film's opening moments, in which parents bid their departing daughters farewell no differently than if they were off to summer camp. Here and throughout, there is a discomfiting surrealism to the images that seems attributable to the tension between these unaccustomed glimpses of girls "playing" war and its hovering reality—even if only a minority of Israeli women conscripts go on to see active combat. Posing with a magazine of high-powered ammunition at

Hen Lasker



her hip, one trainee exclaims "It's like *The Terminator* with Arnold Schwarzenegger!" This incongruity is enhanced, even as the tension is momentarily defused, by interspersing more familiar sights of teenage girl behavior: gossiping and snacking, phoning home for supplies and clean laundry, and shedding their heavy fatigues for bikinis during a day of R&R by the pool.

As Tania Modleski has suggested, even films whose narratives criticize war typically wind up glorifying both war and the warrior (company in which I would include Kathryn Bigelow's roundly acclaimed *The Hurt Locker*).¹ *Seeds of Summer* is never prescriptive or partisan, but no matter what your politics, the sight of an 18-year-old girl (who looks much younger) firing an automatic weapon carries, at the very least, an unsettling note. The film is neither a knee-jerk reproof of war and war films, nor

a narrowly disguised capitulation to both, nor a naïvely pacifist plea. Instead, Lasker lets the images, and subjects, speak for themselves. What they reveal is more canny, complex, and compelling than the conventional institutional exposé. It is also an intervention on two stalwart cinematic traditions: the mythologizing of transcendent *male* bonding during wartime, and the converse defiling of women's relationships within representations of all-female institutions, from the girls' school to the women's prison.

The sequences of girls training in the parched desert landscape have the same lyrical beauty of another female-directed combat-training film, Claire Denis's *Beau Travail*, just as both films invite a desiring gaze that is decidedly homoerotic (with far less subtlety in *Beau Travail*). Slouching in their fatigues, M-16s slung over their shoulders, the girls of *Seeds of Summer* become butch babes—or baby butches. No "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" claptrap here; Israel has welcomed homosexuals to serve openly in the military since 1993. When one of their own loses her virginity to her boyfriend while on a weekend pass, she admits to having shouted out her female drill sergeant's name. For Yarden, another recruit, the long-distance relationship mandated by military service is not seen as maintainable. "It'll be like a month before I see him again," she says matter-of-factly of her boyfriend, also undergoing army training. "I guess we should just part as friends." Whether this is budding lesbianism or just maturity is arguable, but what's evident is that the trainees are fascinated by the "older girls" in their midst. Giddily clustering around the filming Lasker, they stare into the lens and probe insistently for information on their crushes. "Smadar? I'm crazy about her," gushes Lotem about her commanding officer. "She's hot. She's the cutest."

At the same time, this remains an environment bound by discipline and conformity, where a too colorful hairband or talking while on guard duty earns you a humiliating dressing down and cancelled visitations. "Even if you come from a place where you were totally unique, here you are just one of many,"

Seeds of Summer





Seeds of Summer

Smadar lectures her new squad. "Yes it can be hard, but you have to learn to be strong. And remember you have each other." Reporting to Lasker afterward that she felt she had gone too easy on them, Smadar says, "I'm not supposed to be nice." "What are you supposed to be, a bitch?" Lasker asks. "Yes," Smadar responds.

Under pressure to be stern and unsmiling with her trainees, Smadar gradually relaxes into a sweet flirtation with the just-off-screen Lasker. In the film's most natural-seeming, charming moment, Smadar listens wide-eyed as Lasker recounts her experience of finding her first love then confesses to newfound feelings. "It's embarrassing to look into the camera," says Smadar, "I feel naked." But with Lasker's encouragement, Smadar grows increasingly candid even if no explicit endearments are exchanged. Their mutual attraction comes through clearly, but is conveyed almost entirely through the expressions of tentative delight passing across Smadar's face.

This is Lasker's most radical maneuver: the deliberate intervention across the DMZ that separates documentary filmmaker from subject. But despite venturing into the girls' intimate spaces and moments—the confessional exchange mentioned above is whispered from underneath bed covers—Lasker's perspective remains respectful. As it does in would-be voyeuristic moments; one can well imagine how a showering sequence *might* have been handled, but on Lasker's watch it becomes a deftly sweet scene of jubilant voices echoing off the tiles and girls struggling to keep their towels in place without losing their grips on their trusty (and ubiquitous) assault rifles.

For all the compliance and competitiveness the military breeds, *Seeds of Summer* shows gender roles subverted and a community of women actively supporting one another. It is immensely refreshing to see teenage girls cheering on their female officers and themselves rather than, say, guys' sports teams. But a troubling undercurrent of unreflective militarism remains, given that what's garnering applause is a bravura round of missile launching, and that the rousing chant concludes with the line "Let's Go to War!" Just as, despite the radiant pride on Yarden's face as she is singled out by her company commander at the closing awards ceremony—"There's no doubt you're something special," she's lauded—the disquieting subtext holds that what constitutes specialness is a talent and inclination for war.

At a brisk 64 minutes, *Seeds of Summer* lacks the length necessary to do justice to what it attempts ultimately to depict: the

transformation of some of these young women into confident warriors, and others into nervous wrecks. While the "Before" and "After" are all too convincing, too many middle moments go unseen. When we first see Yarden, she's sweating and fighting back tears waiting for her turn on the firing range; by film's end she is beaming uncontrollably as she receives her medal of distinction. But the intermediate footage skips from establishing her as a discipline case to showing her singled out for special duty as the squad's radio operator. Without looking for a pat narrative progression, it is rather confounding given this character non-continuity to discern exactly how Yarden traveled from point A to B.

In contrast, the irrepressible Lotem goes from excitedly gossiping with her chums to being evacuated by stretcher following a panic attack during field training week. We're told such attacks have been occurring regularly, but the scant visible evidence (and what we've come to know is Lotem's penchant for drama) raises a hint of doubt. As do the camera cuts that appear at several intervals and call into question the degree to which their content was naturally occurring. Why would Lasker cut from a medium shot of Yarden looking vaguely tearful to a close-up of her in full flow, rather than maintaining the shot's coherency with a zoom-in? The answer may be as innocent as having missed or fumbled the shot or needing to get the film down to television-friendly length, and certainly there are enough revealing moments captured through long takes to justify giving Lasker the benefit of the doubt.

The film's culminating scene, however, is almost surely staged. Without disclosing its precise content, it involves Lasker attempting to comfort a distressed Smadar, and certainly it provides a fitting—perhaps too fitting—end, by bringing Lasker fully from a position of observation to one of involvement. It feels compromised less because it undermines the film's "authenticity" than because it seems forced. It is also the first moment in the film when the community of women fails as a source of support; chafing at their efforts, Smadar turns to Lasker, who alone seems to understand what she is going through. Staged or not, it is an affecting moment of intimacy, but one that abandons our sense, gauged up to this point, that *all* these young women are in it together.

Seeds of Summer screened in competition at the 2007 Jerusalem International Film Festival, 2008 Outfest Film Festival, and 2010 Brooklyn International Film Festival, among others. It is available for online viewing through YouTube and other video sharing sites. North American broadcast rights are held by ITVS. For more information, contact Eden Productions, 84 Arlozorov St., Tel Aviv 62647, Israel, Tel: 972 3 527 3403, info@edenproductions.co.il

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Notes

- 1 See Tania Modleski, "A Rose Is a Rose? Real Women and a Lost War." In *The New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis (Durham: Duke University Press,



Enough Already

THE WONDERFUL, HORRIBLE RECEPTION OF
NANCY MEYERS

by DARRYL WIGGERS

She is the most successful woman filmmaker since Mary Pickford.¹ Her films sell more tickets than those of Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino. Her track record is so solid she now earns upwards of \$12 million a picture (not including her gross percentage) and is one of a handful of Hollywood directors who has final cut approval on her films.² The major studios are happy to hand over this autonomy because every film she's produced has made them money. Yet the name Nancy Meyers remains relatively unknown outside the Hollywood community. Film literature almost never mention her, critics frequently dismiss her films, and the few flattering media accounts consider Meyers as little else than an accomplished "chick flick" filmmaker, or "rom-com queen."³

Nancy Meyers, with Harvey Miller (left) and Charles Shyer (right) in 1976.

While her success lacks the magnitude of James Cameron, Steven Spielberg and such, she's not producing big-budgeted action epics either. She tells relationship stories that outperform popular stylists like Scorsese and Tarantino. In that context, clearly there is an art to her craft that warrants attention. Besides, after 30 years as a Hollywood player, surely it's time more people realize who she is, why she is so successful, and why it matters.

Star power, marketing and publicity are all elements that help make popular cinema happen, but at its core it's about telling a story that large numbers of people want to see. More significantly, their success helps guide the filmmaking process. What movies are produced in the future depends a great deal on which ones draw audiences today. This is why the citing of box office statistics is crucial to this discussion, and will be stressed throughout. However, the predominant perception in media reports is that the films of Nancy Meyers only cater to a particular audience, especially older women.⁴ Yet her box office success is so pronounced and consistent, is it really possible that only frustrated spinsters and bored housewives are flocking to her films? This writer certainly considers himself an exception.

Nancy Meyers, by the numbers

The numbers below are based on estimated number of tickets sold for each film.⁵ Because of inflation (some of the films date

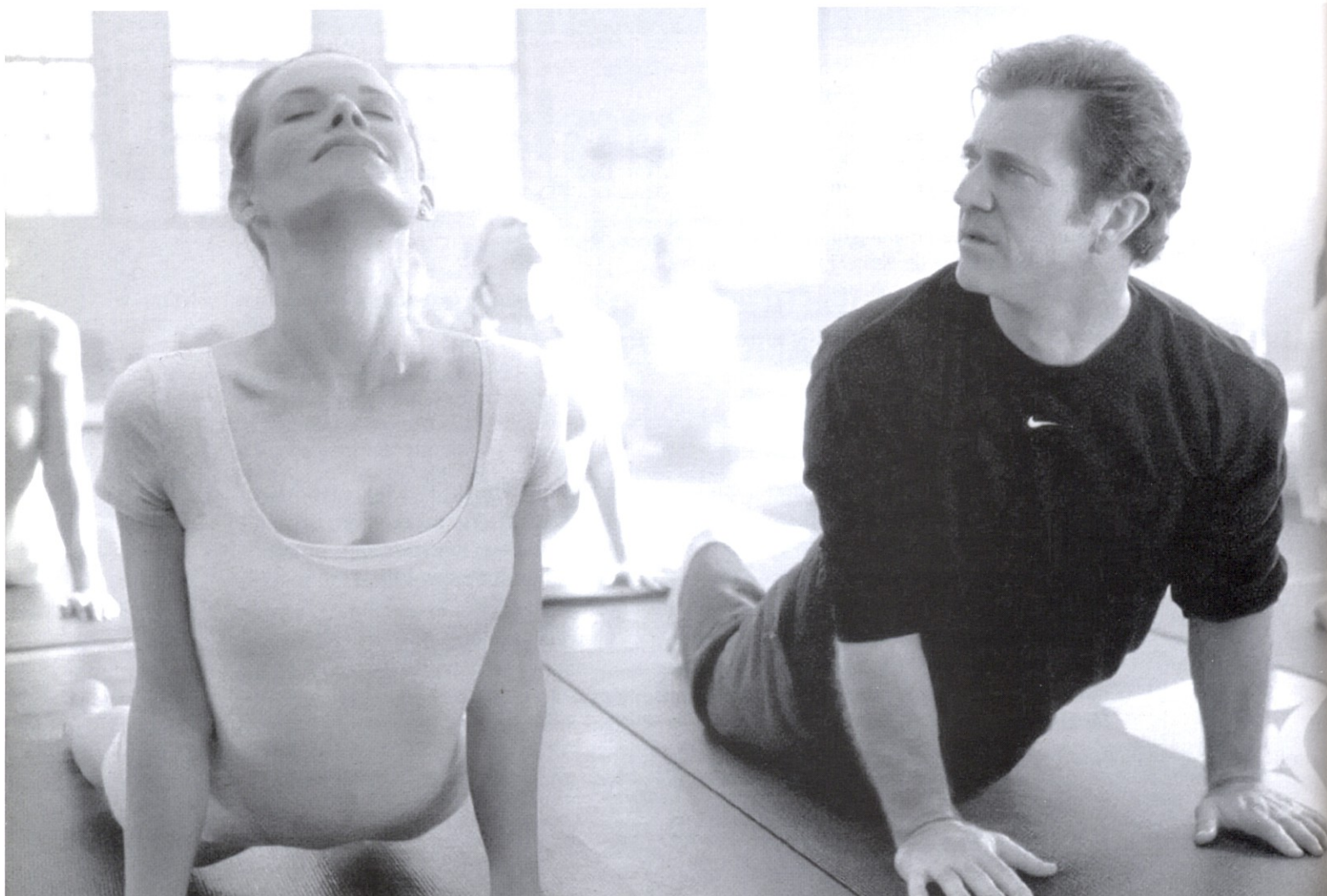
back to the 1970s when ticket prices were as little as \$2) instead of simply listing dollar amounts, the box office totals were divided by average ticket prices for each year.⁶ This comparison will focus on each filmmaker's top five, including those they have written or co-written (to match the five total directed by Meyers) as some—Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen for instance—have as many as 40 films to their credit, spanning a career of nearly half a century. In **Nancy Meyer's** case, including her co-writing credits, her top five prove to be:

Something's Gotta Give (2003)	20,684,700
What Women Want (2000)	33,916,829
Father of the Bride Part II (1995)	17,607,841
Father of the Bride (1991)	21,217,525
Private Benjamin (1980)	25,965,557
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	119,392,452

If, however, we only list those she has directed, the total still easily exceeds many of the others in this comparison:

<i>It's Complicated</i> (2009)	14,941,866
<i>The Holiday</i> (2006)	9,652,648
<i>Something's Gotta Give</i> (2003)	20,684,700
<i>What Women Want</i> (2000)	33,916,829
<i>The Parent Trap</i> (1998)	10,300,054
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	89,496,097

What Women Want (2000)



Compare this with **Judd Apatow**, who has become renowned as one of the hottest comedy filmmakers of the last decade. He has only directed three features—*40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), *Knocked Up* (2007) and *Funny People* (2009)—so his top five films (including those he has co-written) prove to be:

<i>Pineapple Express</i> (2008)	12,164,538
<i>You Don't Mess with the Zohan</i> (2008)	13,930,201
<i>Knocked Up</i> (2007)	21,623,390
<i>Fun with Dick and Jane</i> (2005)	17,212,596
<i>The 40-Year-Old Virgin</i> (2005)	17,074,764
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	82,005,489

Woody Allen is arguably the most well known filmmaker of relationship comedies of all time. With inflation adjustment, his top five films prove to be:

<i>Hannah and Her Sisters</i> (1986)	10,804,323
<i>Manhattan</i> (1979)	16,172,785
<i>Annie Hall</i> (1977)	17,153,105
<i>Sleeper</i> (1973)	11,118,017
<i>Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex...</i> (1972)	10,918,963
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	66,167,193

Richard Curtis has written some of the most popular romantic comedies of the last 20 years. *Pirate Radio* (2009) and *Love Actually* (2003) are the only films he has directed, so the inclusion of his screenwriting credits helps identify these as his top five:

<i>Bridget Jones: Edge of Reason</i> (2004)	6,477,652
<i>Love Actually</i> (2003)	9,899,859
<i>Bridget Jones Diary</i> (2001)	12,662,554
<i>Notting Hill</i> (1999)	22,942,625
<i>Four Weddings and a Funeral</i> (1994)	12,916,871
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	66,096,615

In recent years **Martin Scorsese**, **Quentin Tarantino** and the **Coen Brothers** have been much talked about in terms of their perceived artistic excellence. This garners them much name recognition, which usually translates into greater ticket sales.

First there's Martin Scorsese, who became one of the most celebrated filmmakers of the 1970s with films like *Taxi Driver* (1976). In subsequent decades he has continued making popular, critically acclaimed and award-winning films like *The Departed* (2006), which won Academy Awards for Best Director, Best Screenplay and Best Picture. His top five films include:

<i>Shutter Island</i> (2010)	16,922,840
<i>The Departed</i> (2006)	20,211,346
<i>The Aviator</i> (2004)	16,523,403
<i>Cape Fear</i> (1991)	18,786,691
<i>The Color of Money</i> (1986)	14,095,413
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	86,539,693

Quentin Tarantino is easily the most hyped director of the last 20 years. Even people who don't go to the movies know who he is. Including his story credit for *Natural Born Killers* (1994), his top films are:

<i>Inglourious Basterds</i> (2009)	16,072,096
<i>Kill Bill Vol. 2</i> (2004)	10,661,544
<i>Kill Bill Vol. 1</i> (2003)	11,625,049
<i>Pulp Fiction</i> (1994)	26,453,127
<i>Natural Born Killers</i> (1994)	12,324,208
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	77,136,024

Joel & Ethan Coen first gained prominence with their debut film *Blood Simple* (1984), and later achieved lasting recognition with their Oscar-nominated *Fargo* (1996). Their top films are as follows:

<i>Burn After Reading</i> (2008)	8,406,037
<i>No Country for Old Men</i> (2007)	10,797,039
<i>The Ladykillers</i> (2004)	6,408,888
<i>Intolerable Cruelty</i> (2003)	5,858,645
<i>O Brother, Where Art Thou?</i> (2000)	8,443,894
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	62,759,053

Among female directors, one of the most celebrated artists in recent history has been **Kathryn Bigelow**, who earned a Best Director Oscar (the first for any female director) for *The Hurt Locker* (2008). Here are her top five films:

<i>The Hurt Locker</i> (2008)	1,960,000
<i>K19: The Widowmaker</i> (2002)	6,063,615
<i>Strange Days</i> (1995)	1,829,722
<i>Point Break</i> (1991)	10,265,651
<i>Blue Steel</i> (1989)	1,947,393
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	22,066,381

Sofia Coppola has also earned much media exposure; particularly after the release of her Oscar-nominated film *Lost in Translation* (2003). Her accumulated numbers are as follows:

<i>Marie Antoinette</i> (2006)	2,437,019
<i>Lost in Translation</i> (2003)	7,393,939
<i>The Virgin Suicides</i> (1999)	910,247
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	10,741,205

Mimi Leder's most recent film, *Thick as Thieves* (2009), never secured a theatrical release; hence it earned zero dollars at the box office. Her accumulated numbers are:

<i>Pay It Forward</i> (2000)	6,218,855
<i>Deep Impact</i> (1998)	29,949,822
<i>The Peacemaker</i> (1997)	8,989,791
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	45,158,468

Penny Marshall hasn't directed a Hollywood feature since *Riding in Cars with Boys* (2001). Her top five are as follows:

<i>The Preacher's Wife</i> (1996)	10,882,986
<i>A League of Their Own</i> (1992)	25,911,790
<i>Awakenings</i> (1990)	12,345,137
<i>Big</i> (1988)	27,972,938
<i>Jumpin' Jack Flash</i> (1986)	8,044,233
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	85,157,084

Including her screenplay for *When Harry Met Sally...* (1989), **Nora Ephron's** top five are:

<i>Julie & Julia</i> (2009)	12,550,057
<i>You've Got Mail</i> (1998)	24,695,415
<i>Michael</i> (1996)	21,565,205
<i>Sleepless in Seattle</i> (1993)	30,599,248
<i>When Harry Met Sally...</i> (1989)	23,264,047
TOTAL TICKETS SOLD	112,673,972

Beyond these examples we're into the realm of Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, James Cameron, Peter Jackson, Roland Emmerich, Michael Bay, Ridley Scott, and Christopher Nolan whose gigantic grosses are fueled by action-fantasy adventures, \$100-200 million budgets and monster marketing.

"If Wilder can do it, I can too"

Without the benefit of stories populated with space aliens, fireball explosions, gunplay or even a car chase, what is the secret of Meyers' success? Surprisingly, the best clue can be seen in the name of her production company: Waverly Films. It's actually named after the Waverly Theatre in Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania. Throughout the 1950s and 60s Meyers spent much of her childhood watching movies there. Like Scorsese, Spielberg, Tarantino and countless other directors, she studied the movies she saw in her youth and inevitably desired to make her own; to recreate the same emotions and thrills her favourite films did for her. But instead of crime dramas, action adventures or B-movie exploitation flicks, she generally preferred the relationship comedies of Howard Hawks, Ernst Lubitsch and Billy Wilder.

While she was writing *The Holiday* (2006), for example, Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960) "was kind of a guiding light, because I had a similar relationship with the Kate Winslet and Jack Black characters," says Meyers.⁷ "I was writing about two people who had been hurt by love, and whose friendship blossomed into a romance, so I sort of tracked the way it was done in *The Apartment*."⁸ She also highlights such minute details as the use of narration in Wilder's film, and how it only appears during the opening scenes. "I love that there's no narration anywhere else in the movie. In *Baby Boom* we did it the same way. I said, 'if Wilder can do it, I can too.'"⁹

Baby Boom (1987) was just one of six films Meyers made with her former partner Charles Shyer. Though they shared co-writing and co-producing credits, the stories they produced were typically based on ideas she came up with. *Private Benjamin*, for example, was inspired by a simple thought she had in 1976. "I remember driving on the Ventura Freeway when I was about 27, to run an errand, when I thought, 'What if a girl joined the Army to escape her problems?'"¹⁰

1976 was the same year she met Shyer and they became partners. Though she shared writing credit with him and Harvey Miller on *Private Benjamin*, it was Meyers who originally pitched the story to Goldie Hawn, who then agreed to star and executive produce the film. "Hawn told her to write it and she would produce it."¹¹ But there was no way Meyers would be considered to direct it. Not in 1980.¹² Even her presence on the set was apparently frowned upon. "She really shouldn't be there alone on the set," as one studio exec was overheard saying.¹³ As Meyers recalled, "It was quite an ol' boys' network back then, even if it was 1980."¹⁴

The success of *Private Benjamin* was impressive. It ranked #6 at the box office in 1980. But even though it was Meyers' story idea from the beginning, and her involvement was clearly instrumental in getting it made, it was Shyer who would grab the director's chair for their future collaborations. Still, there are no accounts suggesting Meyers resented being in the shadow of her partner. They made five more films together: *Irreconcilable Differences* (1984), *Baby Boom* (1987), *Father of the Bride* (1991), *I Love Trouble* (1994) and *Father of the Bride, Part II* (1995). All were either modest or major successes, and each drew more and more consciously from the classics of Hollywood's Golden Age. The *Father of the Bride* films, for example, were remakes of the Spencer Tracy films *Father of the Bride* (1950) and *Father's Little Dividend* (1951), while *I Love Trouble* borrowed heavily from the storyline of *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). Together they provide clear signs of Meyers' love for classic Hollywood comedies, as they would continue being referred to in her later films.

Charles Shyer, on the other hand, has yet to show a similar trend. After the two parted ways in the late 1990s he directed the costume-drama *The Affair of the Necklace* (2001). It earned a meager \$430,313 at the box office. His next film, *Alfie* (2004), was a remake of the British-made *Alfie* (1966). The \$60 million film made a relatively paltry \$13 million at the box office, and Shyer has yet to release another film. Consequently, the secret of his earlier success seems more than partially attributable to Meyers' contributions.

"I just hadn't pulled the trigger"

By the early 1990s "I was ready to direct," says Meyers, "I just hadn't pulled the trigger."¹⁵ She was offered the opportunity to direct *Father of the Bride, Part II* "but I didn't want my first directing movie to be a sequel to a movie Charles directed. I didn't think that would be fulfilling."¹⁶ She instead opted to make her directorial debut with *The Parent Trap* (1998) for Walt Disney Pictures, a remake of a 1961 Disney film. With the divorce rate at a near all-time high, Meyers felt its story of twin daughters trying to reunite their divorced parents was especially timely. "It's a dream, isn't it, that you can get your parents back together?" says Meyers.¹⁷

The story set-up of *The Parent Trap* has always defied logic—divorced parents separate their twin daughters, keep them thousands of miles apart for well over a decade, never letting on about each other's existence until the parents unwittingly send them to the same summer camp—and this remake makes no attempt to rectify its contrivance. But as with all of Meyers' films it's the charm of the characters, and how they interact with each other, that elicit its best moments. Again Meyers mines material from classic Hollywood to achieve this result. The scene in which the parent characters first see each other in a hotel lobby is almost shot-for-shot taken from a similar moment between Cary Grant and Irene Dunne in *My Favorite Wife* (1940).

But unlike some—Quentin Tarantino for instance—Meyers rarely makes her film references obvious. She is more concerned with servicing her story than with showing off her knowledge of movie trivia. For example, when she later wrote the ending to *The Holiday*, she once again took guidance from Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*. "When I was writing my ending, I thought, I wonder how Billy Wilder described the look on Shirley MacLaine's face in that scene," says Meyers, referring to the moment when MacLaine finally runs into Jack Lemmon's arms.¹⁸ She had a copy of the original script on her desk and in it Wilder wrote "'She runs to him with a happy, expectant look on her face.' So I wrote that, just for a little private moment. And I finished my script. 'The End.'"

"That night I was invited to a friend of mine's house for a party, and I got there, and Shirley MacLaine was there. It was spooky. I'd never seen her before in my life. Of course, I couldn't help but tell her what I'd done that afternoon in my script. And she said, 'Well, let me give you a hint. Make sure you have a fan on whoever plays the girl, because he had a fan on me, and it really helped with the run.'"¹⁹ Indeed, when the two scenes are compared, this subtle cinematic detail becomes apparent. It perfectly accentuates the emotions of the characters. But without Meyers' admission it's impossible to imagine anyone would have made the connection.

After the success of *The Parent Trap* Meyers joined forces with Mel Gibson, to tell the story about a man who can magically

hear the private thoughts of women. *What Women Want* (2000) would become the most successful film ever directed by a woman, scoring a worldwide box office of over \$374 million (it ranked #5 at the box office that year, bested only by *Gladiator*, *Mission: Impossible II*, *Cast Away* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*).²⁰

Here Meyers begins utilizing some obvious elements of the classic screwball comedy, as in the scene when Gibson wears pantyhose, nail polish, and a Wonderbra. Male cross-dressing shows up in such screwball classics as *Bringing Up Baby*, *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949) and *Some Like It Hot* (1959), but the process was never as comically choreographed as Meyers succeeds in doing. The film then expands on this cross-dressing element by having the philandering Gibson character journey into the minds of women, instead of just their clothes. Like Jack Lemmon's character in *Some Like It Hot*, the experience is more revealing than he expects. It opens his eyes and floods him with sensitivity and understanding of the female psyche he never before saw or embraced.

"Appeals to a wide target audience, not just women"

After the extraordinary success of *What Women Want* Meyers was now in the unique position to tailor a film specifically for two actors of her choosing—Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton. She approached both with an outline and, with their approval

and commitment, went to work on the script. Until then she had either collaborated with Shyer, or reworked scripts from other writers (e.g. *What Women Want*). Now, finally, she would fully venture on her own as sole writer and director. The resulting film, *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), would become her most critically acclaimed.

As Kelli Marshall writes in her abstract to the essay *Something's Gotta Give and the classical screwball comedy*:

"Like its screwball predecessors, *Something's Gotta Give* presents a comparatively complex view of love and romance, which is represented by slapstick humor, verbal sparring, and characters who function both actively and passively. In addition, the film's creators pay careful attention to casting and the distinct character types and the narrative framework of the commitment comedy, a subgenre of the screwball comedy. Consequently, *Something's Gotta Give*, like the screwball comedies of the 1930s and '40s (and unlike most current romance films), appeals to a wide target audience, not just women."²¹

Marshall's abstract singlehandedly sums up the essential ingredients that not only made *Something's Gotta Give* a success, but just about every film Meyers has been involved with, including her later efforts *The Holiday* and *It's Complicated* (2009). As evidenced by the latter's title, the relationships of the characters are not presented as easy unions. The lovers face tough logistical challenges that seem difficult, if not impossible,

The Holiday (2006), Cameron Diaz and Jude Law



to overcome. *The Holiday*, for example, concludes on a happy note (arguably too schmaltzy for its own good) yet never explains how the two couples (particularly the Cameron Diaz and Jude Law characters) can possibly continue their relationship when they both have firm roots in their home environments, thousands of miles apart. It was a problem that existed in *The Parent Trap* too, but never addressed.

The structure of Meyers' character relationships often results in them painting themselves into such awkward corners and, instead of figuring out a tidy solution, their adventures typically end midstream. But the charm of the process, the unforeseeable roads they travel, the witty banter they share—all familiar elements that exist throughout classic Hollywood films—help overshadow this logistical crisis. It is a notable departure from the more linear approach of many contemporary romantic comedies that often scream predictability, and fail to be as consistently successful as a Nancy Meyers film.

The crucial difference between Meyers' films and most modern-day romantic comedies (often erroneously considered one

and the same by film critics) is that, in the latter, the central lovers typically begin as a perfect union. They just don't realize it yet. They are blind to their shared interests, desires and compatibility—but it's obvious to the audience. In *The Ugly Truth* (2009), for example, the Gerard Butler character is presented as a misogynistic cad who could not possibly be a caring lover to anyone, much less the highly-strung female lead. Quickly, though, we are presented with evidence of his true sensitivity (e.g. his caring relationship with his nephew) so a love union is no longer a question of how, but when. It's a lazy device.

In *What Women Want*, on the other hand, the Mel Gibson character is a misogynistic cad. It even opens with a detailed back-story that firmly establishes how he was born and bred into a model of boorish manhood. Then, when he gains the power of female insight, he fittingly exploits it for the purposes of sexual conquest and career advancement. How he will later win the heart of Helen Hunt's character, whose career he tries to destroy, is not made obvious—though it seems surprisingly genuine when it does happen—nor how their relationship will

It's Complicated (2009), Meryl Streep and Alex Baldwin



continue beyond the final frame. After she discovers how he had attempted to sabotage her career, she fires him in the final scene. Not exactly a typical happy ending.

"She has rushed in where angels fear to tread"

Besides the aforementioned essay by Kelli Marshall, it's difficult to find any significant analysis or study—even mere mention—of Meyers and her films beyond the occasional publicity-driven journalistic piece.²² What does exist often strives to make the same point; that the appeal of her films is limited to women.

In her mammoth New York Times feature, unfortunately entitled "Can Anybody Make a Movie for Women? Nancy Meyers can. Again and again," Daphne Merkin provides the greatest reinforcement of this fallacious assumption.²³ Its cover photo—a strikingly obvious Photoshop creation—has Meyers standing with satisfaction amongst a movie theatre crowd comprised entirely of laughing, smiling women. Not a man in sight. Merkin further claims that Meyers focuses "on making films that both feature and speak to middle-aged women... Meyers's decision to pay attention to a part of the population that is often construed (and often construes itself) to be invisible stands out in bold relief... [she] has rushed in where angels fear to tread to rescue the middle-aged and manless woman from her lonely plight. She has taken this sorry creature, who is bombarded with reminders of her vanished youthfulness everywhere she turns, and placed her in an alternate universe, where she is not only visible but desirable just the way she is." Merkin carries on in this vein for several paragraphs before finally making reference to the screwball comedies that are clearly Meyers' forte, before swiftly surmising, "What those earlier movies had that Meyers's movies don't was a certain knowingness; hers speak to a more naïve, homespun spirit."²⁴

For an 8000-word profile, published in one of America's most celebrated newspapers, this is one of the most flattering one is likely to find about Meyers. Time Magazine film critic Richard Schickel, for example, has habitually written with venom and a touch of chauvinism when discussing her films. In his review of *What Women Want* he wrote, "The movie has none of the giddy wit we associate with classic romantic comedy. It just runs on and on—like a slightly stupid story you wish you hadn't overheard in a singles bar."²⁵ Of *Something's Gotta Give* he complains of "this movie's smugness. It's so pleased to bravely show old folks having fun that it forgets to be genuinely comic, romantic or sexy." Then in his review of *Catch and Release* (2006), directed by Susannah Grant, he cites Meyers again: "Back when men directed women's pictures, they throbbed with energy... You might not, in the end, believe them, but boy they were gripping to watch. Directors like Grant or Nancy Meyers (of *The Holiday* among other titles) want to keep their leading ladies unhysterical, as if descents into the irrational were somehow fuel for sexism."²⁶

Snide reviews of her films are aplenty, but any mention of Meyers in film literature is conspicuously absent. David Thomson's *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (re-issued and updated in 2004) is variously described as "the finest reference book ever written about movies."²⁷ Meyers is not even listed. The back cover blurb for *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing* claims that it "casts a critical eye on the often-overlooked work of women filmmakers."²⁸ Again, zero mention of Meyers (presumably because her films are not "overlooked"). *501 Movie Directors: A Comprehensive Guide to the Greatest Filmmakers* fea-

tures an international mix of classic artists, independents, and the occasional box office champion.²⁹ Over two dozen women directors make the list, as well as box office champs and comedic artists such as Jerry Lewis, John Hughes and Amy Heckerling—but not Meyers. *Women Who Run the Show: How a Brilliant and Creative New Generation of Women Stormed Hollywood* claims to cover the period from 1973-2000 (2000 was the year Meyers became the most successful female Hollywood director with *What Women Want*).³⁰ Here, finally, Meyers does get mentioned—twice—but only in name, and only in reference to passages that focus on Barbra Streisand and Goldie Hawn. For a 480-page book, dedicated exclusively to discussing notable—and successful—Hollywood women, she isn't even deemed worthy of a paragraph mention.

Male directors, on the other hand, don't seem to have this problem. From George Stevens to George Lucas, and from John Huston to John Waters, they are celebrated for all sorts of accomplishments. Even for being awful. Edward D. Wood Jr. has had a staggering amount of books, documentaries and even a big-budget Hollywood feature made about his life and films. But appreciation of women directors—if it exists—is usually limited to those who are deemed to have artistic merit. These exceptions include Sofia Coppola and Kathryn Bigelow who have enjoyed prestigious attention in recent years. Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003) has earned accolades and entry in books such as *501 Must-See Movies*, and the award winning film *The Hurt Locker* (2008) is now guaranteed honour placement for decades to come.³¹ Neither film was especially successful of course, but these women are the ones who are commonly championed. Not Meyers.

"I personally don't think either of them is a good filmmaker"

Earlier the statistical data showed the strong performance of films by Mimi Leder, Penny Marshall and Nora Ephron. Like Meyers, these moneymaking directors have also experienced neglect and dismissal at the hands of critics and scholars.³² Of course Michael Bay and Roland Emmerich have made some of the biggest box office hits of all-time, and they also get the cold shoulder. Judging from this collective dismissive treatment, the perception is that these filmmakers are unworthy of detailed discussion; that they have no artistic merit. For example, when asked what she thought of Meyers and Nora Ephron, New York Times critic Manohla Dargis said, "I personally don't think either of them is a good filmmaker — they make movies for me that are more emotionally satisfying but with barely any aesthetic value at all."³³

In her review of *It's Complicated*, Dargis helps explain what she means when she complains "Meyers doesn't have her own visual signature." True, the more celebrated directors have their trademarks. Kubrick has his graceful dolly shots, De Palma his split-screen and slow-motion sequences, Tarantino his car-trunk POVs, Scorsese his restless camera moves, and Sergio Leone his wide-angle close-ups. But Meyers is not interested in calling attention to herself with her camera. She wants the viewer focusing on what is happening inside the frame, not the frame itself. "I've always made movies in a sort of classic form," says Meyers, "the way people have done it for a long time."³⁴ It's not very sexy, but it serves the story well. Billy Wilder, Frank Capra, Ernst Lubitsch and Howard Hawks did much the same thing when they told similar stories, and nobody complained. Nobody wrote them off as "chick flick" directors either.



Like Meyers, these Hollywood greats (at least that's what many call them now) were simply trying to tell a story of how men and women interact that would elicit sympathy, affection and laughter. It was about dramatizing a human experience that is not exclusive to one sex. And the way they did it was not always easy to spot by the naked eye. As Meyers explains, "I think the best thing to learn from those movies is the pacing and timing."³⁵ That fan effect from *The Apartment* is a great example.

What is unique about Meyers' form of romantic comedy is that her characters don't simply meet, fall in love and live happily ever after. They always have responsibilities, commitments, insecurities and logistical roadblocks that won't simply evaporate with a kiss. They are complicated characters because, in real life, we're complicated. Audiences can relate to that—women and men. And, despite these hurdles, viewers can take pleasure in how her characters arrive at a happy ending anyway.

Happy endings have been an important part of the movie-going experience since the beginning of the cinema—surely Meyers experienced it when she sat in the Waverly Theatre a half a century ago—and the way Meyers pulls it off has never been easy. "Writing is a bitch," as she confesses.³⁶ "Movies don't look hard, but figuring it out, getting the shape of it, getting everybody's character right and having it be funny, make sense and be romantic, it's creating a puzzle."³⁷

There is little question Meyers has endeavored to understand why the films of her youth captivated her. She has carefully studied how the elements of writing, casting, set design, costumes, cinematography, music and editing all conspire to make people laugh and feel good. This understanding has since been applied to her own stories. The fingerprints of classic Hollywood are all over her films, but with a contemporary twist which makes them accessible to a new generation.

"Enough already"

It's now been decades that critics, scholars and journalists have been grouching about the lack of women in the film industry.³⁸ In reaction to this Meyers once replied, "We don't want to be our own niche. We're filmmakers like everybody. How many years in a row are we going to talk about the fact that we make films and we are women? Enough already."³⁹ Still, many wonder how the so-called "glass ceiling" can be broken.⁴⁰ Of course those who are actually breaking it continue to be snubbed, belittled, or outright forgotten. This is not helping. Surely if the canonization of, say, a Leni Riefenstahl can continue, some acknowledgement of Meyers' existence is warranted.⁴¹ At the very least she's an especially useful conduit for discussion and analysis of the classic Hollywood form as she is one of the few filmmakers still harking back to it, giving it a new face and new life.

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Notes

1 Silent film star Mary Pickford formed her own production company (The Pickford Film Corporation) in 1916, through which she controlled all aspects of her films' production, from cast and crew selection, approval of scripts, as well as advertising. By 1919 she, along with D. W. Griffith,

Charles Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks, created United Artists, which further expanded her power and influence. Meanwhile Nora Ephron has a success rate that closely matches that of Meyers, but most statistical comparisons tend to favour Meyers.

- 2 Daphne Merkin, "Can Anybody Make a Movie for Women?" (New York Times, December 20, 2009): web.
- 3 Francesca Babb, "Nancy Meyers: The rom-com queen" (The Independent, Film & TV Features, January 9, 2010): web.
- 4 Merkin, web.
- 5 The numbers are based on domestic (U.S.) results only as worldwide statistics are often incomplete:
- 6 Box office statistics derived from Box Office Mojo (boxofficemojo.com) and divided by average (U.S.) ticket prices from the National Association of Theatre Owners (<http://www.natonline.org/statisticstickets.htm>)
- 7 Amy Dawes, "In the Screening Room: Nancy Meyers" (DGA Quarterly, Summer 2007): web.
- 8 Ibid., web.
- 9 Ibid., web.
- 10 Sheri Linden, "Dialogue With Nancy Meyers, Showest Director Of The Year" (Hollywood Reporter, March 23, 2004): web.
- 11 Mollie Gregory, *Women Who Run the Show: How a Brilliant and Creative New Generation of Women Stormed Hollywood* (St Martin's Press, 2002): 158.
- 12 Of the 7,332 features made in Hollywood between 1939 and 1979, women directed only 14. Karin Klenke, *Women and Leadership: A Contextual Perspective* (Springer Publishing Company, 2004): 119
- 13 Elizabeth Guider, "What Nancy Wants" (Variety, November 19, 2006): Web.
- 14 Guider, web.
- 15 Margy Rochlin, "Out on Her Own Now, and Feeling Liberated" (New York Times, December 10, 2000): 215.
- 16 Ibid. web.
- 17 Ibid. web.
- 18 Dawes, web
- 19 Ibid. web.
- 20 *Twilight*, directed by Catherine Hardwicke, has since earned \$384,997,808 worldwide, but that figure doesn't take into account higher ticket prices. Based on average U.S. ticket prices for their respective years, *Twilight* sold 26,848,169 tickets whereas *What Women Want* sold 33,916,829
- 21 Kelli Marshall, "Something's Gotta Give and the classical screwball comedy" (Journal of Popular Film & Television, Volume 37, Number 1 / Spring 2009).
- 22 Amy Kaufman, "It's not complicated: Nancy Meyers is a perfectionist" (Los Angeles Times, December 26, 2009): web.
- 23 Merkin, web.
- 24 Ibid., web.
- 25 Richard Schickel, "The Twelve Films Of Christmas" (Time Magazine, December 25, 2000): web.
- 26 Richard Schickel, "January: A Movie Wasteland" (Time Magazine, January 26, 2007): web.
- 27 David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004): quote from Graham Fuller of Interview Magazine on back cover.
- 28 Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis, Valerie Raoul (ed.), *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing* (UBC Press, 2003): back cover
- 29 Steven Jay Schneider (ed.), *501 Movie Directors: A Comprehensive Guide to the Greatest Directors* (Quintessence, 2007): 3-5.
- 30 Gregory, *Women Who Run the Show*.
- 31 Emma Beare, *501 Must-See Movies* (Octopus Publishing, 2004): 111.
- 32 David Thomson, in his book *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, had this to say about Nora Ephron (p. 277-8): "Just because she rates as a successful woman in Hollywood is no reason to omit the feeling that she is the director of at least five supine pictures" As for Penny Marshall (p. 581), he claims "She is competent and impersonal—like a tv director—and as such could become a workhorse director for mainstream movies."
- 33 Irin Carmon, "'Fuck Them': Times Critic On Hollywood, Women, & Why Romantic Comedies Suck" (Jezebel.com, December 14, 2009): Web.
- 34 Dawes, web.
- 35 Ibid. web.
- 36 Babb, web.
- 37 Ibid. web.
- 38 Manohla Dargis, "Women in the Seats but Not Behind the Camera" (New York Times, December 10, 2009): AR13
- 39 Babb, web.
- 40 Karina Longworth, "Who Will Lead Female Filmmakers to Parity—Nora Ephron, Nancy Meyers, or Kathryn Bigelow?" (Vanity Fair, December 18, 2009): Web.
- 41 The Leni Riefenstahl website (www.leni-riefenstahl.de) claims "more than 100 books have been written about Leni Riefenstahl." The site then lists 14 books it considers the "most informative." Presently, none exist for Meyers.

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